



# Mail Order Mishap

*A  
Brides of Beckham  
Story*

# Kirsten Osbourne

USA TODAY bestselling author

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## Chapter One

Ada Applebottom stood still while the seamstress her mother had hired did her final fitting on Ada's dress for the big dance coming up. She'd already been stabbed four times with pins, and she knew that her constant twitching had to be the culprit.

She wanted to be outside. Who wouldn't? But there was a dance in Boston in just three days, and her parents wanted her to meet just the right man—a man of money and influence. In other words, a man who sounded so boring she already despised him.

"I think I want to spend the weekend with Grandmother," Ada said to her mother, who was watching her be stabbed.

Her mother sighed. "You know as well as I do, we had this dress made just for the dance this weekend. You need to go and find a husband."

Ada sighed dramatically. Her mother had been trying to marry her off since she was sixteen. "I'm only eighteen, Mama. Why do you think I need to marry? Someday the perfect man for me will come along, but it's not going to happen at a dance in Boston. I *hate* Boston." Ada wanted a man who was down to earth and fun to be around. She'd never met anyone in Boston who matched that.

"You're going. You're going to meet a man and marry him. There's no need for you to drag your feet either. I just know this dance is the one."

Mrs. Benson, the seamstress, stood. "It's done. I'll have it ready for you by Friday evening as I promised."

"Thank you," Mother said. "We appreciate your hard work."

Mrs. Benson smiled. Ada happened to know that Mrs. Benson thought her mother was difficult—and she was—but she would always be subservient because her mother was her biggest customer. "I'm always happy to help sweet Ada."

As they left the shop together, Mother frowned at Ada. "If servants find you sweet, then you're doing something wrong."

Ada groaned aloud. That was the type of statement that made her realize her mother wasn't ever going to change. "I want to go to Grandmother's and ride horses. I want to be able to help her with her garden. I want to wear my hair down if it suits me."

"You know none of that is possible. Not this week anyway."

Mother stopped outside the restaurant. "Why don't I make you a promise? If you do your best to find a husband at this dance, I'll let you go visit your grandparents next weekend."

Ada's mother didn't approve of the time Ada spent with her paternal grandparents. "And you won't go with me to tell me that riding astride is unladylike?"

"You know I don't like it when you do that."

"I do. I also don't care a great deal." Ada had always been "wild" according to her mother. But her mother had been raised how she was raising Ada—to be a member of high society. It wasn't something Ada had ever aspired to.

"You have to start caring, Ada. No man of any character will marry you when he realizes how you run wild when you visit your grandparents. It's up to you to show them your best self, and the hoyden who runs around with her hair in knots while wearing trousers of all things, is not your best self. In fact, it's your worst self."

"I'll endeavor not to introduce myself to men at the dance by saying, 'When my mother isn't looking, I ride astride with my hair down, while wearing trousers.' Will that help?"

Her mother sighed. "If we don't get you married off soon, we'll have to go to New York City to find a gentleman who will have you. I don't want you moving that far away!"

Ada wasn't certain why. Her mother didn't enjoy her company at all, so why did it matter if she was far away? "I said I *wouldn't* say that." Ada smiled at her mother, doing her best to look angelic. It wasn't easy for her to pretend she was something she wasn't.

"I only want what's best for you, Ada. Why can't you see that?"

"Why can't you see that you don't *know* what's best for me?" Ada returned.

They went into the café and sat down to eat. "I shouldn't have let the cook take any days off this week. Not with all we have to do to get ready for the dance."

"What do we still have to do?" Ada asked. "I have a new dress we'll pick up in two days. I have new dancing slippers, which I hate because they pinch my toes. What else needs to happen? You're not going to make me practice dancing again, are you?"

"No, but I was thinking a little poise might be just what you need to catch the right man's eye. I'd like you to practice walking

with books upon your head again. We haven't done that since you came out at sixteen. Isn't that a lovely idea?"

Ada groaned, wishing for all the world that she could go out west and do what she wanted to do. Marrying a gentleman was at the very bottom of her list of things she would enjoy. A farmer or a rancher...that's the type of man she wanted to marry. Down to earth, God-fearing...Not one who worshiped the almighty dollar. "I will do it if it pleases you." Deep down, Ada did want to please her mother. She simply wasn't very good at it.

After they'd finished lunch, they walked home through the quiet streets of Beckham to the mansion where they lived on Rock Creek Road. As they walked, Ada spotted Elizabeth Tandy just returning from a walk, pushing her baby in a pram. "I'd like to talk to Elizabeth for a bit," she told her mother.

"Yes, of course. Be home in thirty minutes or so."

"Thank you." Ada liked Elizabeth a lot. Though she now lived in one of the largest homes in Beckham, Elizabeth had been raised on a farm with more siblings than Ada had ever tried to count.

Elizabeth smiled when she saw her neighbor walk toward her. "Hello, Ada. Have you and your mother been shopping?"

Ada waited until her mother was inside their house before responding. "No, we've been at the modiste, having my dress fitted to me." She shook her head. "I don't want to go to the dance in Boston this weekend, and I don't want to marry a gentleman."

"Your mother won't be happy to hear that." The look Elizabeth gave her was sad—whether she was sad for Ada's mother or for Ada was unclear.

"No, she won't, but I don't care. I can't marry to make my mother happy for the rest of her life. I need to marry someone who will make *me* happy for the rest of mine."

"You're right. You really do." Elizabeth frowned. "Do you know what kind of man you think would be right for you?"

Ada nodded. "I want to marry a rancher or a farmer. Someone who works with his hands and has calluses, not a man who always keeps his hands perfectly clean. I want a man who wouldn't be scandalized if I wore trousers or rode a horse with my hair flying behind me. Someone who doesn't think I need to be in a glass box, but wants me to be his helper..." She shrugged. "Does that make sense?"

"It does." Elizabeth glanced over at the house where Ada's

mother was already inside and waiting for her daughter. "I hate to cause strife between a mother and her daughter, but you know what I do for a living, right?"

Ada shook her head. "I don't. I know you have a lot of women in and out."

"I have a business where I send women to the west to marry strangers. I'm sure you've heard of mail-order brides."

Ada's eyes widened. "Yes, I have! I told my mother I wanted to be a mail-order bride to a rancher, and she told me I'd lost my mind, and I had to put the thought right out of my head."

"I can see your mother saying that," Elizabeth said with a smile. "I think I have the man you're looking for. You don't care if he's not a rich man?"

"No, I really don't. I think it would be good. I want to cook and clean and garden. My grandmother has worked with me on how to cook, and sometimes I sneak into the kitchen and have the cook help me as well. I'm sure I could do it if I only had the chance."

"Come see me the next time you get a chance. In the next couple of days would be ideal. I want to get this young rancher a bride as soon as I can."

Ada felt hope for the first time in a long while. A man who didn't think white gloves were necessary to go out in the evening? That would be the kind of man she wanted in her life! "I'll find a way to slip away. Mother is in bed by nine most evenings..."

Elizabeth smiled. "You come over after nine then. Will your father mind?"

"He's in Boston on business. He won't care at all."

"I'll see you then."

Ada practically skipped home, her thoughts no longer on the dreadful dance she must attend, but instead of the opportunity she would have to marry a rancher. What could be better than that?

Her mother looked at her curiously. "Why do you look so happy?"

Ada shrugged. "I enjoy talking to Elizabeth. You know that."

Not looking convinced, her mother handed her two books, and Ada obediently placed them atop her head. She would be gone soon, and her mother could no longer torture her with perfect manners. Life would be better. She just knew it!

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It was shortly after nine when Ada hurried to Elizabeth's house and knocked on her door, waiting impatiently until Bernard Tandy, Elizabeth's husband, opened it for her. "Mr. Tandy, I'm meeting Elizabeth."

"She told me. Please, come in." He led the way down a long hall and to the last door on the left. "Elizabeth, your appointment is here."

Elizabeth looked up from the baby she had obviously just finished nursing. "Would you put the baby to bed?" she asked softly, offering him to her husband.

"Of course, my love." Bernard carried the baby from the room, while Elizabeth waved toward the sofa.

"Let me find the letter I have in mind for you..." Elizabeth dug through a stack of papers on her desk, and finally produced a letter, which she offered to Ada. "I think this is the man."

Ada smiled as she took the letter and proceeded to read it.

*Dear Mrs. Tandy,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I am looking for a wife. I own a small ranch in Montana, and I find that I do not like being alone. Having a wife would mean there were meals waiting for me when I return home after a long day on the range, but more importantly, it would mean someone to hold. Someone to love and who I would hope would love me in return.*

*I live relatively close to another family who suggested I send this letter to you. My wife will not be completely isolated. I am near the town of Mountain Home, Montana, and I love it here. I live in a valley but am surrounded by beautiful mountains. My ranch is bisected by the Royal River. I cannot explain the beauty of this land.*

*In a wife I would like to have someone who enjoys being outdoors and who would be willing to keep up a garden. I need someone who is a decent cook because I am not. I would like to have a whole mess of children so a woman who is young enough to do so would be a plus. I will gladly read letters from any woman who would like to write to me. I will gladly pay for her journey here and her spending money along the way, as well as your fee. Please find me the wife I have been dreaming of my whole life.*

*Sincerely,*

*Wade Kelso*

The more she read of the letter, the more Ada's smile grew. "He's the one. I'm going to marry Wade Kelso."

Elizabeth smiled. "You'll need to write him a letter and wait until he sends money."

"Why don't I write him a letter and then head out there with my own money? I don't want to wait. Mother will have me married off to a man who will make me incredibly unhappy."

"We could do that. It's always better if we wait for a response, but I understand why you're in a hurry." Elizabeth studied her friend. "Do you plan to leave before the dance?"

Ada sighed. "I don't know. Mother is planning on taking me to Boston on Saturday morning. Maybe if I go with her, I can lose myself at the train station in Boston."

Elizabeth frowned. "You'll eventually tell her you married, right?"

"Oh, of course. As soon as I'm with child, I'll let her know where I am. She'll find a way to bring me back and pass me off as a virgin otherwise." Ada shrugged. "I plan to lose my virginity as soon as I marry. I know I'm not supposed to say things like that, but you were a farm girl, so you know exactly what I mean."

"I was, and I understand perfectly. I wish your mother could understand your need for a simpler life, but since she can't, you'll have to try to make it on your own. I do worry your mother will lose her mind if you disappear in the train station."

"What if I leave a letter on her pillow and just go? Then she'll surely telephone home and one of the servants will find the letter and read it to her. Would that be better?"

"What will the letter say?" Elizabeth asked. She obviously wanted to make certain that Ada was thinking everything through.

"That I have moved on, and I would appreciate it if they didn't try to find me."

"Oh, Ada, I worry so about your mother. I know she's difficult to live with, but she does love you."

Ada sighed. "I know she loves me, but if I let her have her way, I won't be able to be happy. And I think everyone deserves at least to attempt to find happiness."

"I do as well." Elizabeth thought for another moment. "Perhaps you can leave the letter with me, and I can wire your father on Saturday afternoon. By then people will be searching for

you.”

Ada nodded. “That would work if you don’t mind being dragged into it. My parents will never forgive you for your part in things.”

“I’m aware. I just can’t let them worry over you so much. I’ll make certain they think you’re in the wrong place as well. Send them to the south or something. They will never think to go to Montana.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. It’s better than sneaking to the train station here in the middle of the night. I do think I will travel in a less than straight direction. Perhaps if I go to Missouri and then Wisconsin, they’ll find my trail, but not find me.” Ada thought about her mother’s wig collection, and she vowed she would take one as well. That would be better than being found out almost as soon as she left. “I have some ideas.”

Elizabeth smiled. “All right. I’ll telegraph Mountain Home, Montana, and we’ll make sure someone will be waiting for you.”

Ada stood and walked to Elizabeth, hugging her friend closely. “I’ll always be grateful to you for helping me get away.”

“Just be happy.”

## Chapter Two

On an early July morning, Wade headed into town to see if he'd gotten any responses to his mail-order bride request. It was odd, but he was nervous about getting his mail from the small post office in town. He was just thankful they'd opened a post office there in Mountain Home, and he didn't have to drive all the way to Cauldron Valley to get the mail anymore.

When he stopped to talk to the post mistress, Mrs. Landry, he smiled at her. "Any mail for me?" he asked.

Mrs. Landry looked. "No mail, but there's a telegram."

Wade was surprised. He'd never received a telegram. He held his hand out, hoping that he would be able to read it without help. He'd been learning to read under the tutelage of Cassandra Royal, and he felt confident with most things, but a telegram? He'd probably forget everything he'd learned.

He unfolded the paper. YOUR BRIDE IS COMING STOP SHE IS TAKING THE LONG WAY BUT SHOULD BE THERE WITHIN TWO WEEKS STOP HER NAME IS ADA APPLEBOTTOM STOP

Wade frowned at the paper. Why would his bride take the long way? And wasn't he supposed to send money for her journey? This made no sense to him at all.

"Thanks, Mrs. Landry," he said automatically as he turned away. How was he supposed to know when to go to the train station and fetch his bride? Why did this make so little sense?

He was home before he remembered to check the date on the telegram. It was dated the first of July, which meant, his bride could be coming any day. He was too busy on the ranch to go and wait for every train though. He had no idea what he should do.

As soon as he stopped in front of his house, he changed his mind and turned to ride toward the Royals' ranch. Perhaps Cassandra would know what to do. She seemed to be comfortable with just about any situation.

He pulled up in front of the Royals' house, where he had spent years as a ranch hand before he'd purchased his own ranch. He still helped out the Royals on occasion when they needed an extra hand. By winter, he would be able to work only for himself, which was something he'd been striving for.

Cassandra walked out onto the porch, her new baby cradled

in her arms. "Hello, Wade! It's been a while!"

"Sure has. Look, I need some advice." He rode closer to the porch and handed her the telegram, watching as Minnie—Cassandra's kitten—jumped out from under Cassandra's skirt. "That kitten still has no manners."

"I think there's something wrong with her," Cassandra said, "but she's just perfect for us." Her eyes went to the telegram, and she read it quickly. "Oh my. How are you supposed to know when she arrives?"

He shrugged. "That's what I'm trying to figure out. I'd like to be a good husband and meet her at the train station, but I don't have a lot of time to just sit there and wait for her." He couldn't ask Cassandra to go. Her baby wasn't old enough to be in the wagon for that long.

"This is true..." Cassandra sighed. "I would think with you not knowing when she'll arrive, she should expect to find her own way to you."

"But...she'd have to hire a stranger to drive her to me." He shook his head. "I don't think that's a great idea."

"I don't know what else to tell you." She looked over toward the road at the sound of a wagon. "Isn't that Felix Potter? That woman beside him can't be Bridget. Do you think...?"

Instead of responding, Wade rode out onto the road and fell in step beside the wagon. "Felix, good to see you."

"It had better be since I've got your bride!"

Wade smiled. "I was hoping that was the case. I was never given a date when she'd be arriving, so I couldn't meet her at the train station in Cauldron Valley." He nodded to the lady, doffing his hat. "It's nice to meet you, Ada Applebottom."

Ada smiled at him, and he was pleased to see it was a big smile with teeth, and not the simpering smiles he'd seen on some of the women from back east. "You can forget you ever heard the name Applebottom. I'm about to be Ada Kelso. Do you want to go into town and marry today?" she asked.

He smiled. "Sounds good to me. I'll ride ahead and get the wagon hitched up. Then we don't even have to go inside without a chaperone. We can just head straight to town."

She smiled. "That sounds positively lovely."

As Wade rode toward home, he thought about how...well, how civilized Ada looked. She wore a bonnet that perfectly matched

a dress that had to have been made for her. And she looked as if she was used to drinking champagne and eating fancy foods. He couldn't offer her any of that.

He really hoped she knew how much work was involved in being a rancher's wife. He didn't want her to collapse within a month or two. Already he was worried, and he'd barely met her.

But...she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever set eyes on. He wanted her to be his bride, even if it wasn't the best thing for her, which he knew was positively selfish.

At home he quickly hitched up the team and had it ready for her when she pulled up with Felix in the wagon. When he saw her again, Wade felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. The woman was the kind men dreamed of. He wasn't sure why a woman of her status would travel all the way out west to marry a stranger, but he was so glad she had. Marrying her was like a dream come true for him.

He walked to the wagon and handed her down, making certain her skirt wasn't tangled in the wheel. "Welcome!" he said, hoping she wouldn't say anything about his house. It was just a cabin, made of logs, and it had a dirt floor. He knew she was worth so much more than this.

"Thank you." She looked around her eagerly. "Oh, this place is perfect! It's just what I was hoping for." She clapped her hands together in excitement.

Wade couldn't believe she was telling the truth, but he wasn't about to accuse her of lying either. "I'm glad you like it."

He walked to the back of the wagon and looked at her large trunk. She must have brought everything she owned to have a trunk so big. "Would you mind giving me a hand with this, Felix?" he asked.

Felix jumped down and took the handle on one side of the trunk while Wade took the other. As they approached the house, he whispered, "What do I owe you for getting my bride to me safely?"

Felix shook his head. "She already offered to pay me for the ride, but since I found my wife through the same matchmaker, I thought I'd do it for you for nothing. I know how I felt the day my wife got off that train."

Wade smiled. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"No problem. I hope she's willing to spend some time with Bridget. I still think she gets homesick for Beckham."

"We'll make sure we set up a day and time for you to bring your family for supper," Wade offered. "It's the least we can do after you went out of your way to bring her to me."

"Not a problem at all. Maybe in a month or so when you and Ada have settled in, we can come. You take your alone time with your bride until then."

"Oh, don't think I won't. I plan to take all the alone time I can get with her until the babies start coming." Setting the trunk down, he glanced back at Ada, and couldn't help but think about how much fun making those babies was going to be.

Felix smiled and clapped Wade on the back. "I wish you every happiness. We're planning to come to your church on Sunday, and we'll set up a time to meet then."

Wade knew they really enjoyed the services in Cauldron Valley, so he assumed they were coming so Bridget and Ada could meet. "Sounds good to me."

Felix drove off once the trunk was in the crowded little house the couple would share. There wasn't a true bedroom. Instead, there was a bed in one corner of the house and a table, stove, and sink in another. A few chairs to sit on filled up the rest of the space. Wade knew he was going to have to expand soon in order to keep Ada in the manner to which she was accustomed.

When Ada peeked her head in, she was thrilled to see there was a sink. "No indoor plumbing?" she asked. She was used to that at her grandparents' house and was thrilled to see it would be the same way here. *Oh, this will be the best adventure ever. I can't wait to use the outhouse!*

"No, there's an outhouse back behind the house."

"Splendid!"

He was surprised at her excitement over using an outhouse, but he wasn't going to say anything about it. She was handling things much better than she probably should be. "Are you ready to go get married?"

"I am! I truly am!" She hurried to the wagon and stepped on the wheel to pull herself into it before he could get to her.

Her speed in taking her seat surprised him. "I figured you'd never ridden in a farm wagon," he said after pulling himself up.

"Oh, sure I have. My grandfather is a farmer, and the days at his farm were the most wonderful, most idyllic times of my life." Ada looked thrilled to talk about her grandparents.

"Is that so? What did you do there?" Wade was becoming more and more worried that this woman didn't have a single clue as to what being a rancher's wife was like.

"Oh, when I was a little girl, my grandfather taught me to ride. My mother hated it because he didn't have a side saddle and just put me astride. My grandmother taught me how to garden and how to cook. I'm not the best cook because my mother never let me practice, but I can make a decent meal, and I'll get better with time. I had our cook make me up a book of receipts, and I will use it the best I can."

"What was your home like?" He hated to even ask because he had a feeling she was from a very different background than he was. He needed to know why she hadn't come straight there as well, but some questions would have to wait until after they were married. The drive to the church in Mountain Home wouldn't take long.

She wrinkled her nose. "My mother was determined to raise me to be a lady. I went to all the dances in our town, and then had to go to as many as possible in Boston. Mother told me if I didn't find a husband soon, I was going to be going to New York City to meet men there."

"You know there aren't going to be a lot of dances in your future, right? You'll be expected to work alongside me."

"That's been my dream since I was a small child." She smiled at him, and he felt the smile all the way down to the pit of his stomach. He'd once thought that he was attracted to Cassandra, but his feelings for Ada were so much stronger after only a few minutes in her presence. He'd only touched her once, and that was on the hand, but everything about her lit him on fire.

"Is that so? You dream of working?" Her life had been different than his, and he worried she had no idea what she was getting into.

"I do!"

He stopped the wagon in front of a small church. "Let's walk over to the parsonage. Pastor Jenkins will be happy to marry us. Much happier since you aren't holding a kitten."

Ada grinned at him. "I have a feeling there's a story behind that, and I insist you tell me just as soon as my last name is Kelso."

He chuckled. "I think I'm starting to like you, Ada."

"I sure hope so! I plan to be married to you for at least fifty



years. Probably more like seventy-five. That sounds about right, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does." He knocked on the pastor's door, and within a moment, the door was opened. "Mrs. Jenkins, hello. We're here to be married. Is Pastor Jenkins home?"

Mrs. Jenkins nodded. "I'll get him. Come in."

They stepped into the house and were led through a spotless home to a parlor, where Mrs. Jenkins left them. "Are you excited?" Ada asked him.

"I am," he said softly. Wade wished he knew her better before they tied the knot, but he wasn't sure that was practical. Not when he was marrying a mail-order bride anyway.

Mrs. Jenkins came back into the room with a man behind her. "Would you like me to stay for the ceremony, Bob?"

"Of course!" Pastor Jenkins told his wife. Then he stood looking at the couple in front of him, most likely noting their disparate appearances. Ada looked as if she'd just stepped off a dancefloor, and Wade looked like he'd just come in from mending fences. "Shall we begin?"

Ada nodded emphatically, looking over at Wade with affection in her eyes. He was the man who had made it possible for her to escape from her parents after all. How could she not feel affection for him?

When the preacher told Wade to kiss his bride, he looked at her uncertainly, but Ada was having none of that. She took the lapels of his shirt into her hands and pulled his head down for their first kiss.

Wade was surprised at the need that spread through him. This woman...whether she was marrying beneath her or not...made him feel so much more than any woman ever had.

He kissed her, trying to keep his lust for her from being obvious to the pastor and his wife, but he had a difficult time doing so with the way she was kissing him. When he finally raised his head, he saw spots around him. "Let's go home, wife."

Ada smiled. "Thank you, Pastor. Mrs. Jenkins." Taking Wade's hand, she pulled him out of the parsonage and toward his wagon. Marriage was starting out just the way she'd dreamed it would.

## Chapter Three

On the way back to the ranch, Wade told Ada the story about the kitten. "The day Cameron and Cassandra Royal decided to marry, she spotted a crate of kittens and went nuts over one of them. It was this little tortoise shell, and she talked him into buying it for her before she agreed to marry him. Now she knew he wanted to marry her, but she waited. I don't really think it was on purpose, but I do know he agreed to let her have the kitten just so she'd marry him. She told him it was the best wedding gift ever. Pastor Jenkins wasn't pleased when she walked down the aisle carrying a kitten instead of a bouquet of flowers."

Ada laughed, throwing her head back and giving a real laugh, instead of the type she'd been taught all her life was ladylike. "You have got to be kidding me! Now I wish I'd had a kitten for flowers!"

"Instead, you had no flowers at all." He frowned. "I should have picked flowers for you."

"I'm sure if you'd known what day I was coming, you would have. You seem like the type to be romantic."

Wade shrugged. "I try. I can't say I'm good at it though." Was any man ever truly good at romance?

"I have a feeling you'll be wonderful. I don't need someone's fake idea of romanticism anyway. I think sitting on a bench watching our grandchildren play in fifty years is the most romantic thing we could possibly do!"

"I hope by then it's great grandchildren," he said, glancing over at her.

"You're right. I hope that too."

He pointed to the left side of the road. "That's the Royals' house. Cassandra is the one I told you about who used a kitten as her bridal bouquet. She was sent here by the same matchmaker who sent you."

"Oh, I can't wait to meet her, then!" As much as she was thrilled to be out from under her mother's thumb, she knew she'd always miss Massachusetts, and she would be thrilled to have a connection to it. "I think Mr. Potter said something about his wife coming here from the same matchmaker as well. Soon, there will be enough of us to start a women's club!"

He grinned at her, pulling onto his property. "Why don't you

go in and look around while I unhitch the team.”

Ada smiled. “I would love to. My very first home of my own.” She spread her arms to both sides and spun for a moment before stopping to grin at him. “Thank you for making my dreams come true, Wade.” Instead of walking straight to the house, she walked to him and pulled his head down for another kiss. Kissing was a good way to start their marriage, and his kisses were oh so sweet.

She pulled back after a moment, her palm against his cheek. “Let me go see what I can find for supper. I think it should be something light, so we don’t have a hard time enjoying one another later.”

As she hurried off, he had to wonder where this woman had come from. She was perfect for him. Absolutely perfect.

Inside, Ada pulled an apron from her trunk. She’d taken a huge trunk with her to Boston, and her mother had questioned it but been satisfied when Ada had said she wanted to make certain she had her best dresses to wear when visitors started calling the next day.

The Boston townhouse her parents owned was perfect for having men call upon her, and her mother had never let that slip from her attention. Of course, Mother had been obsessed with her marrying a man of means.

Shaking her head, Ada put the thoughts of what her mother had expected of her out of her mind. She had to fix supper for her new husband, and she prayed there was food on hand she would be able to cook easily. As well as she could sew and knit, her cooking left something to be desired. Grandmother had always told her that cooking was a skill that you learned by cooking every day through the years, and not by cooking a few meals per month.

She found what looked to be store bought bread, and she found some ham steaks in the small ice box. *At least he has an icebox!* She started a fire in the stove and cooked the ham until it was finished, flipping it halfway through. She put the meat between two pieces of bread and figured it would be good enough. She would have to take inventory of his food supplies the following day, and then she would know if she must make a drive into Cauldron Valley. Mr. Potter had told her that Mountain Home had no stores.

She looked for some canned vegetables to go with the sandwiches, but she could find nothing. Perhaps he didn’t eat vegetables. She’d have to ask about his favorite foods, so she could

start off cooking things he loved. What better way was there to a man's heart?

Grandmother had always told Ada that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Her mother had said her grandmother didn't know anything. The best way to find your way into a man's heart was to be beautiful.

Ada wrinkled her nose. There was no way she was going to use her looks to get a man to fall in love with her. That kind of love wouldn't last when she was no longer young and beautiful. She wanted real love, and she was certain her grandmother was right. She would have to cook her way into Wade's heart. Starting tomorrow.

When Wade walked into the house and saw she'd made sandwiches for their first meal as husband and wife, he bit back his disappointment, smiling at her. "That smells good." It wasn't a lie. The ham did smell good. He wasn't sure that he had enough supplies to make a more complicated meal, and he wasn't one to complain, so he sat down and got ready to eat the first meal she'd cooked as his wife.

"Join me. I couldn't find much to use for cooking, so I figured we'd settle for sandwiches tonight, and tomorrow, I'll cook something better. I may have to head to Cauldron Valley to find something though."

He frowned. "If you decide you need to go to Cauldron Valley, I'll talk to Mrs. Royal. Not Cassandra with the kittens, but her mother-in-law. She'll drive you, and you won't have to worry about learning to hitch up the horses and drive yourself."

"You think me rather useless, don't you, Wade Kelso?" For the first time since she'd met the man, she felt as if she was being judged by her appearance, and she didn't like it one whit!

"I don't think you're useless. Do you know how to hitch up a wagon?" he asked.

"I do indeed. And unhitch, and I can drive as well. Maybe next time you'll ask me if I can do something instead of assuming I don't know how!" Ada wouldn't let herself be angry with him, though. He was giving her a wonderful life after all. But at that moment, she wanted to scream at him.

"All right. I'll let you hitch up the horses then. I'm sorry I assumed you couldn't." He covered her hand with his. "You just seem like you're a member of high society, and I'm not. I do things

for people like you. I don't expect any skills at all."

She nodded once. "If my mother had her way, you'd be right about me. But my grandmother worked hard to ensure I could do things around a farm. She told me over and over that one day I would make a wonderful farmer's wife. I do hope she was right!"

He frowned at her. "I hope she's wrong!"

"What?" Ada had no idea why he would say such a thing. Shouldn't he be thrilled that she was able to take care of the tasks that would be put in front of her.

"I don't want you to be a farmer's wife at all. I'd rather you stayed married to me for those fifty years you promised." He smiled at her, and Ada couldn't help but smile back.

"All right. I'll be the best rancher's wife this area has ever seen."

"That sounds like what I'm looking for." He brought her fingers to his lips. "I'm glad you're here, Ada."

"As am I." She had no qualms about standing and sitting on his lap, looping her arms around his neck, and pressing her lips to his. She had some married friends back in Beckham who told her how she needed to be willing to touch her husband when she finally found one.

Wade gave in to the kiss, wondering how the woman became so bold. It sounded like she'd never had the opportunity to be alone with a man, so her behavior didn't make a lot of sense to him.

After a moment, his thoughts drifted away as he pulled her closer to him and enjoyed every minute of touching her this way. His hand found the pins in her hair, and he pulled them out one after the other. He wanted to feel her hair cascading over his hands. He wanted her to sit on his lap wearing nothing.

Finally, she pulled away, resting her forehead against his and sighing. "I have to get the dishes done before we can make love. I'll hurry."

He blinked a couple of times. "We can wait for our wedding night if you would like to." Even as his nether regions cursed his mouth for offering such a thing, he knew it was the gentlemanly thing to do. And Ada was obviously used to gentlemen.

Ada laughed. "Are you kidding me? Don't make me beg because I have a feeling it wouldn't be difficult." Men had touched her hand before, but never once had she allowed one to kiss her. She'd saved that for her wedding day, and now she was so glad she

had. Touching Wade made her feel truly alive in a way she never had before.

He smiled, shaking his head. "You're something else, Ada Kelso."

The look she gave him had him wanting to beg for her to skip the dishes and go straight to bed. It was a look of pure need. He had no idea why this woman was as randy as he was, but he wasn't about to complain.

As nervous as Ada was about the wedding night, she also knew it was the only way to be certain to not have her mother try to drag her back home once she realized where she was. She had to get pregnant quickly. Her wedding night might not be soon enough.

As she washed the dishes, she imagined herself holding a baby, the newborn smell filling her senses. Her friend, Maddie, had a baby shortly before Ada left home, and she could still smell the delicious baby smell. If it was her own child, then she could love it with everything inside her.

When the dishes were done, she wiped them all and put them onto the shelves. There were no cupboard doors, but she didn't mind. She knew farm and ranch houses were never as nice as the house she'd grown up in. And this house? This tiny little house? Why it was perfect for honeymooners. She would have the ability to brush up against her husband with every step. There was no better way to ensure there was a baby quickly.

She thought back over the past couple of weeks, feeling the guilt rise up inside her. She'd disappeared as soon as her mother had turned her back in the train station, and she'd hurried into the women's necessary to put on a wig and glasses, as well as an old dress she'd traded one of her gowns to a maid for. It didn't matter now. She could wear whatever she wanted.

She was on a train to Georgia within twenty minutes of leaving her mother. As Boston had faded away, she'd felt freer and freer. Of course, she'd also felt guiltier and guiltier. She'd sent two telegrams to Elizabeth from different places so her friend could tell her parents she was fine. She only hoped it was enough and that Elizabeth wouldn't be bothered by her parents when they knew Elizabeth had helped Ada get away.

She turned back toward Wade after the last dish was put away, and he noticed the look on her face. "Is something wrong, Ada?" he asked.

“No, just thinking.” Ada refused to believe anything was wrong. She’d done what she had to do to live her own life. It was best if she stopped worrying about home. She’d send her mother a nice newsy letter as soon as she was certain she was expecting.

“Well, whatever thoughts they are, they seem to leave your heart heavy. If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here for you.”

Ada smiled sweetly at him, returning to the happy bride he was used to seeing. “I thank you for that, but all is right with the world. I married the rancher of my dreams, and it’s our wedding night.” She sashayed across the room and stood directly in front of Wade’s chair. “I figured whoever sent a letter back east for a bride had to be less than appealing to the eyes. But you,” she said as she brushed a lock of his hair away from his forehead. “You’re a mighty attractive man, Mr. Kelso.”

He smiled at that, getting to his feet. “I need to go milk the cows. I keep two for milk and butter.”

“All right. Do you have laying hens as well?”

“Yes, but I usually collect the eggs in the mornings. I can make scrambled eggs for myself, and that’s about all.”

She smiled. “I’ll take over egg collecting duty in the morning. It’s always been one of my favorite chores.”

Wade pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes or so.” As he walked outside, he couldn’t help but think his wife was perfect in every way. How was such a thing even possible?

## Chapter Four

Ada undressed and put on her nightgown while Wade was out milking the cows. Suddenly she wished she had a kitten as a small companion. Her grandmother always had kittens around. She said they were good for chasing off mice.

Climbing under the covers, Ada said her prayers silently, praying for forgiveness for making her parents worry. She hated how she'd left, even though she knew it was the only way she would ever be able to live the life she wanted to live. As always, she laid out her worries and fears, knowing her Maker would understand. He was a forgiving God after all.

When her prayer was finished, she realized that Wade still wasn't back. She fought to keep her eyes open, but they closed before she could stop them.

Five minutes later, Wade walked into the house, excited for his first time with a woman. Instead of finding his wife waiting up in bed for him as he expected, she was sound asleep. She'd been traveling for weeks, so he knew he shouldn't be too terribly disappointed, but he was.

He undressed in the dark and climbed under the covers, wishing he felt like he could wake Ada and make love to her. Instead, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, wishing his wife had been able to stay awake for just a bit longer...

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Ada woke well before the sun came up the following morning, surprised for just a minute to find herself in bed with a man. It took her a bit, but then it all hit her. She'd married this man the previous day, and she was waiting for him to make love with her when... she'd fallen asleep.

*Great way to start your new marriage, Ada!* She could feel that it was almost time to wake and start her day, so she reached under the cover and ran her hand along Wade's arm, hoping that he'd wake quickly, and they could take care of impregnating her just as quickly as possible.

She knew the instant he woke, because he caught her hand, holding it against his skin. "Ada?"

"It's a little bit before we need to get up and start our day," she said softly. "I thought maybe we could..."



He chuckled. "Don't have to ask me twice!" He rolled to his side and kissed his wife for all he was worth, his hands going to the buttons at the front of her nightgown. He wanted to touch all of her and not just ruck up her nightgown and have his way with her. What kind of man did that with his wife the first time?

He slowly undressed her and knelt on the bed beside her as she knelt in front of him. His hands went first to the sides of her breasts, and when she didn't complain, they moved to cup them. "Does that feel good?" he asked.

She nodded. "It does." She hadn't really expected to enjoy making love, at least not from what her friends had told her, but so far, she found the experience wonderful.

When he pushed her to her back and penetrated her, she was surprised at the amount of pain she felt. Instead of crying out, she closed her eyes tightly and waited for him to finish, roll to his side, and hold her close. "You didn't like that," Wade said after a good long while.

"I liked most of it. I'll learn to like it all." She gave him a brave smile and brushed his hair from his forehead. "I need to cut your hair. Maybe not today, but it keeps falling in your face."

He smiled. "There's a barber in Cauldron Valley, but it's so far to drive. I rarely have my hair cut more than a few times per year."

"When I was a little girl, my grandmother told me cutting a man's hair was his wife's job, whether she realized it or not. So, she had me watch over and over as she cut my grandfather's hair, and then one day, she handed me the scissors. From then on, I always cut his hair."

"Well, then I'd love for you to cut mine."

"You would?" Ada loved the idea of performing the task for him. He was a good man, and he deserved a good wife.

He kissed her once more and rolled to his side of the bed, standing up to dress. "I'm going to head out and milk the cows. I'll get the eggs while I'm out there as well."

"Sounds good. Thank you." Ada hadn't realized quite how shy she'd feel about him after their lovemaking. Laughing at herself, she waited until Wade was out the door before she sprang from the bed and dressed in her oldest dress, one she and her grandmother had made together. Her only other dress suitable for working on the ranch was the dress she'd traded the maid for, and it was too drab even to work there. So, she would have to get some fabric when she

went to fetch food.

While she waited for Wade to come back inside, she found the door to the cellar and went down the ladder that descended into it. The lantern she held shed enough light, but there was very little food there. As she was climbing back up the ladder, Wade came into the house. "What were you doing down there?" he asked.

"I needed to see what food we had on hand so I could decide what I should purchase. And the answer is everything! I need to purchase everything."

Wade nodded, cringing a little inside. He knew they'd have to put their purchases on credit, and he hated to do that. "The shopkeeper in Cauldron Valley has an account set up for me. Just put it on the account."

Ada nodded, knowing she would use some of the pocket money she'd brought with her rather than use his money. She still had jewelry she could sell if it became necessary. It wasn't that she didn't think he could provide. She just saw no reason for him to worry about their finances when she could help. "I'll probably go this morning."

"That's a good idea."

"While I cook breakfast, you have to tell me your favorite foods. I've never cooked for my husband before."

He smiled. "I have never met a meal I didn't enjoy. I just like to eat, and I tend to eat a lot because of the amount of work I do." He shrugged. "I can't remember the last day I took off work. Before yesterday of course, and that was only half a day. I decided I couldn't wait to see if I had a letter for another day, and I think that was a wise decision."

"Why?" Ada asked.

Wade laughed. "I forgot. I never told you that I found out you were coming when I went into town yesterday. I had gone to the Royals' place to get advice from Cassandra about what to do about not knowing what day you'd arrive when I saw you drive past with Felix. That's why I hurried over to talk to you both."

"Well, it worked out great then, didn't it?"

He leaned against the worktable as she whisked eggs together, added a dab of milk, and poured it all into the skillet she'd already heated on the stove. "Why didn't you come straight here?" he asked.

Ada looked at him with wide eyes. "How did you know I

didn't come straight here?"

"The telegram I received from Mrs. Tandy said you would be traveling but not coming here right away. I was curious why you'd do that."

Ada took a deep breath, staring down at the skillet. Surely now that they'd made love, he wouldn't try to back out of their marriage. "I had to leave without my parents' knowledge. My mother took me to dances all the time to try to help me find a husband, but I had no desire to marry a gentleman. I wanted to marry a man who did real work, not something like banking." She sighed. "I sneaked away from my mother in the train station in Boston when we went for a dance. I took one of her wigs, and I changed into a dress that belonged to one of my maids. I gave one of my dancing dresses in exchange."

Wade felt as if there was a stone in the pit of his stomach. "Your parents don't know where you are?" he asked. "What will they do when they find out?"

She sighed dramatically. "I'm hoping by the time they find me, I'll be with child. My mother wouldn't be able to pass me off as a virgin if I was pregnant."

"Would she do that?" he asked, frowning at her.

"I have no idea, though I wouldn't put it past her. She is determined that I live a life in high society, something she's always done. Father works half the time in Beckham and half the time in Boston. We always kept a townhouse in Boston, and Mother would take me, and we'd go shopping and attend the theater. I would beg her to leave me with my grandparents because I'd dread being dressed up like a little doll as she insisted. I'd wander away every chance I got and play in the dirt...or chase puppies."

Suddenly, Wade understood why she'd been so forward with him from the time she'd arrived. She wanted to be pregnant so she couldn't be sent home. "I see." He walked away from her and sat down at the table, thinking about what she'd said to him.

"Are you angry?" Ada wasn't certain she could bear the idea of him already being angry with her. She needed him on her side!

"Angry? I don't think so. I need to think about this though. I thought I was getting a bride who was old enough to be on her own." A thought occurred to him, and he closed his eyes in dread as he asked, "How old are you?"

"I'm eighteen."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Better than it could be. I was worried you'd tell me you were just fourteen or something."

She laughed. "No, but Mother has been trying to marry me off since I was sixteen. I hate being paraded around a group of men as if I'm bait on a fishhook."

"I can understand that. What are we going to do if your parents come here to bring you home?" he asked.

Ada's heart jumped a bit at his question. He'd asked what "we" would do. Not you. We. "You're my husband, so legally I belong to you now, and not my father. We'll tell them that too!"

He hated that he was now a party of her running from her parents. In some ways, he understood, but in others...well, he wouldn't have married her if he'd known. He felt as if the whole thing was a mishap orchestrated by his new bride. "We'll have to tell them that, won't we?"

She put their plates on the table and sat beside him, putting her hand in his. "Would you mind praying for us, Wade?"

"I think we're going to need lots of prayers," he said softly before bowing his head and praying for forgiveness for everything they'd done.

After breakfast, he saddled his horse and rode out for the day, while Ada cleaned the kitchen and sat down to make a list of everything they needed for their kitchen. There was no flour or sugar, so those were first, and then she thought about different meals she could cook for her husband. Surely, he would feel better about her being his wife if she was doing her duty and cooking wonderful meals for him.

She said a quick prayer that he wouldn't be angry with her, and he would be on her side if her parents did come to fetch her. And she prayed she would be pregnant soon. Only a pregnancy would deter her mother. She was certain of it.

After making her list, she pulled her reticule from the trunk where she'd tucked it before getting into Mr. Potter's wagon with him the previous day. Quickly flipping through the money she had there, she knew she could easily pay for all the supplies they needed as well as buying fabric to make a few day dresses to wear.

Then she headed out to the barn and led the horses out, blowing in their faces so they could get used to her scent. "Now we're going to Cauldron Valley. I remember that we go to the fork in the road, and then we go right. We'll end up at the mercantile,

and I can get the things we need there. I think I also want to buy some wool to knit a nice sweater for Wade for Christmas. I have a feeling we're in for a mighty cold winter, and I want to be prepared."

She continued her monologue as she hitched up the team, and then she took her place on the wagon seat. She'd driven and hitched up wagons many times, but this was the first time she'd done it with no one watching over her. Her grandfather had always watched her hitch up the wagon, and he'd ridden with her when she went for a drive.

She felt like a true adult for the first time in her life. It was odd that marrying and sharing a bed with her husband hadn't made her feel like an adult. No, it had taken hitching up a wagon alone to feel like she was truly grown.

As she drove toward town, she looked around her at the mountains surrounding the valley where she now lived. It was hard to believe she could call a place this beautiful home for the rest of her days. She'd made a wise decision marrying Wade, and she was thrilled to finally be there.

If only she could make him understand why she'd had to make the decision she had. She had felt like a terrible person as she'd explained what she'd done, but she couldn't regret it. It had brought her across the country to marry a stranger. Of course, that stranger hadn't expected to find himself saddled to a girl who had run away from her parents.

She sighed and kept driving, hoping against hope that her visit to the store in Cauldron Valley would be a good one. Perhaps she could meet a friend there. But most importantly, she needed to find the food to fix hearty meals for her husband.

When Ada finally parked in front of the store in Cauldron Valley, she was thrilled she'd found it without help. For a bit she'd been certain that she had taken a wrong turn, but no. She was there. And she was now a grown woman, and she would remember to act like one.

## Chapter Five

Ada detested shopping back in Massachusetts, but she found the little general store there an enjoyable place to shop. She chose fabric for three new dresses first. She knew it was extravagant considering her new lifestyle, but she couldn't do the dishes wearing a ballgown.

After choosing her fabric and asking to have seven yards of each cut for her, she moved on to choosing a color of yarn for the sweater she planned to knit for Wade. She had a difficult time deciding between red and green, but she finally decided on red. That way if he was lost in the snow, he could be found with his bright colors. She chuckled a little to herself as she moved on to start shopping for the food they needed.

When she got to the front of the store and stacked everything on the counter, the owner of the store gaped at her. "You want all of this?"

She nodded. "I do."

He scratched his head. "I don't like to put this much on anyone's account."

"That's all right," Ada told him, "I have cash."

He watched as she counted out the money he'd asked for and saw her tuck the rest of the money into her reticule. "I'm not certain it's smart to carry that much money, miss."

"Mrs. Kelso. I married Wade."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Does Wade know you're carrying that kind of money?"

She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"I'm sure it matters to Wade!" The man called his son over to carry her belongings out to her wagon. "Thank you for your business," he said as she was on her way out.

She raised her hand in a wave. She couldn't decide if she liked him for trying to look out for her, or if she didn't like him because he hadn't seemed to think her capable of making her own decisions.

The drive home was peaceful, and Ada was happy to be alone in the wagon. Back home, she and her mother always had a driver. She never had a chance to really talk while they shopped.

Now, driving home, she contented with having an entire conversation with herself, trying to convince herself that despite

Wade's reaction, she'd done the right thing by coming out west to marry him. Sure, she could have handled her parents better, but her mother never would have accepted her decision to go west.

Once home, she carried in the crates of supplies she'd purchased as well as the fabric and yarn. The fabric she left on the table, but she hid the yarn in her trunk. What better place was there to hide it? She was certain Wade wouldn't be digging through her things.

She wasn't certain if he'd be home for the noon meal or not, so she quickly fried up some bacon to put on bread. It wasn't a great meal, but it was better than not eating at all.

She'd just finished making the bacon when Wade came inside the house. "I forgot to tell you I'd be home for the noon meal. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?" she asked, her face bright upon seeing him. "It's nice to have company in the middle of the day."

"I'm sure it is." He looked at the bacon sandwiches she'd made and then looked around the little cabin. It didn't look as if any cleaning had been done, and there was fabric lying across the rocking chair. "You went to the store this morning?"

"I did. I made a list of supplies we needed, and I got what was necessary," Ada replied.

"It was necessary to buy that much fabric?" he asked. He could already see where his money earned that fall would go. To her spending habits. "I'm not a rich man, Ada. I hope you'll be able to curb your spending soon."

Her eyes widened. "I paid for the dresses with my own money. I thought that it was only fair, since most brides would have come to you with clothes that they could wear easily."

"You shouldn't be spending your own money," he said, feeling cantankerous. "I'm going to provide for this family."

Ada sighed, wishing that he was being a little less prickly about their financial situation. "I know you will. I was simply trying to do the right thing by coming to you with what most women would have. It's not fair that I can't wear my ball dresses for housework."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's fine."

She was glad she hadn't mentioned that she'd spent her own money on food for them as well. While they ate, she asked him what he was doing that day. "Mending my eastern fences. The river

is high this year, so I'm also trying to keep the calves out of it. I'll move them across for better pasture in a few weeks, but for now, I want them on this side of the river." He shook his head in exasperation.

She giggled. "That's something I would love to see once I get all the housework caught up. I'm going to do laundry tomorrow, but I'll spend the rest of the day today on supper and getting the house all cleaned." She could tell it had been some time since a deep clean had been done, if ever, but she didn't mind. It made her feel useful, which was what she wanted.

"That would be really nice. I haven't taken the time to do laundry in a good long while. I'm afraid my clothes are going to walk away on their own."

Ada shook her head. "I'll keep them from walking away! Lye soap is the only answer."

"Did you get some at the store today?" He'd been out of lye for a few weeks.

"I did. I went through the whole house this morning to see what I needed to purchase today."

"Good. Then you won't have to go back to the store before you start laundry."

She nodded. "I don't. Which is a very good thing. I'd like to do some baking tomorrow as well, but first I need to get this house clean."

He sighed. "I'm not exactly a good housekeeper."

"I don't expect you to be. I'm here to take care of those things for you." Ada was thrilled she was needed. It was strange, but when her mother had talked of her future and how she would have to run a household and plan parties, she'd hated the idea. But she wanted to cook and clean for her new husband. And any children that came along, of course.

As soon as Wade had left to work more, Ada jumped to her feet and got to work. She did the dishes, swept, and mop the floor, dusted every surface, washed windows, and then she started on supper. It was a lot of work to do, but she was amazed at how good she felt doing it—well, other than the back pain that came with doing that kind of work. She now understood the term backbreaking.

When Wade arrived home, he realized that she'd been true to her word. The cabin fairly shone with the cleaning job she'd done,



and he smiled as he looked around. "You did so much work today!"

She nodded. "I was excited to do it. I helped my grandmother with the spring cleaning a few times, and I always enjoyed it. I do still need to black the stove, but that can wait until tomorrow."

He shook his head. "Don't wear yourself out your first week here!"

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said. "I plan to find some time to ride soon too." She sighed. "Would you mind if I wore trousers when no one was around so I could comfortably ride astride? Or would that bother you?" She'd brought a few pairs of the trousers she'd worn at her grandparents' house. She just hadn't dared to wear them yet.

"That wouldn't bother me at all," he said. "I think you should be comfortable." He looked down at the food she'd put in front of him. "What is this?"

"It's my favorite thing my grandmother used to make for me. Shepherd's pie. She taught me to make it when I was about ten, and I've made it several times since. I hope you like it!"

He looked down at the food in front of him. "I have never tried shepherd's pie. My mother talked about eating it when she was a girl."

"Was your mother Irish? My grandmother is, and she said it was her favorite Irish meal, and I loved it like she did."

"Your last name isn't Irish, is it?"

"No, my grandmother married an Englishman, much to her family's chagrin. They were never fond of grandfather, which is why they left Boston and settled outside of Beckham. There was less disappointment from the family that way. At least that's what my grandmother has always told me." She realized then she should probably write to her grandmother as soon as she had the chance. Her granny would be worried, and it would be better to tell her, so Grandmother could calm her parents.

He smiled. "My mother is Irish as well. She married a Scot, and they settled down in Wisconsin. I moved out here when I was sick of milking cows. Of course, now I milk cows for me, so I'm not sure why I left in the first place!"

"Do you ever want to go back?" she asked, watching as he took his first bite of shepherd's pie.

"This is delicious!" he said. "My father didn't like it, so my mother never made it." He took another bite, chewing slowly. "Do I

ever want to go back to Wisconsin? I don't think so. I prefer ranching to farming, and there are six other sons still in Wisconsin to take up the farming for Da when he's ready."

"I think that's great." She tucked into her own pie, thrilled with how it had turned out. "I'm glad you like the shepherd's pie. I'll make it often."

"That sounds good to me. I told you I'm not a fussy eater."

"No, I understand, but some people just don't like their food mixed together this way. I always have, but my mother wouldn't touch this."

Wade eyed her for a moment. "I'm not sure I want to meet your mother," he finally said.

"She's not all bad." Ada shrugged. "I was very close to her before I came out. After that, she was always on me to improve something about myself. Or to be flirtier with the men at parties, but I still needed to be quiet most of the time. Men would rather be listened to. I didn't want what she wanted, and that's why I had to leave. She's not a bad person." She sighed. "I think she loves me too much if that makes sense. She's certain that I want everything she wanted when she was my age and just marrying my father. I am different from her, though."

"I would love for you to meet my parents. They are salt of the earth kind of people. Da always wanted to farm, and Ma was happy to do whatever made Da happy." He smiled. "They've never visited me here, but Da keeps saying he's going to pass the farm onto my older brother, Patrick, soon and then they'll come to see me. I do think a grandchild may be the temptation they need to make the journey."

"Do you visit often?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I've visited once since moving out here years ago. It's hard to take off at any time of the year for a rancher, and I was working for a rancher before I was here. I still work some for the Royals, but mostly I work for me now."

"Do you need the extra money? Is that why you work for the Royals?" She wondered if she should just go ahead and sell her jewelry. If it would make him feel freer financially, she'd do it in a heartbeat. She didn't plan to go to any fancy dances anytime soon anyway.

He shrugged. "The extra is nice. I always put whatever I earn right back into the ranch. My spread is relatively small, and I don't

have any hands working for me, but I'd like all that to change. It's hard to run a ranch as a one-man operation."

"I'd be happy to help as soon as I get the house under control."

Wade looked around him. "This isn't under control?" he asked, shocked that she thought more needed to be done.

"It is mostly. I need to deal with the laundry, and I need to make myself at least three more day-dresses. And I brought fabric for two more aprons from Beckham." And she wanted to get his sweater made before summer was over. That was a necessity in her eyes.

"I see. Just don't work yourself into an early grave." Already he was developing feelings for her that went beyond what he wanted to do to her in the bedroom. He was still a little annoyed that she'd not told her parents about what she was doing, but the more she talked about them, the more he understood her decision. "Tell me about your father."

She shrugged. "There's not much to tell. He works a lot. Mother was always throwing parties for him. He didn't enjoy attending them, but he needed to entertain for work. He's a banker, and he took that job very seriously. He was raised by the grandparents I talk about so much, but he was good with numbers and hated farming."

"Who will inherit your grandparents' farm?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, there's no one to run it. I'm sure it will be willed to my father upon their deaths, but Father will just sell it. He has no feeling of sentiment toward the place."

"But you do," he said.

"I do! I would choose to live in their home over the mansion my parents live in. It's strange how many wonderful memories were made on that farm and how the house in town just felt like a place to be tortured. Do you have any idea how many hours I spent walking around with books on my head?"

He chuckled. "And why would you do that?"

"My mother believes that a woman will be chosen to be a bride based on her poise. So, I had to always stand straight and keep a smile on my face. If I'd wanted to marry a gentleman, it would have been one thing. But I made it clear I had no desires in that direction when I was thirteen. Mother still wouldn't listen to me."

“I’m sorry she made things difficult.”

Ada shook her head. “I’m the one being difficult. My mother gave me every luxury money could buy, and she made it clear I was the focal point of her world. I should be grateful, not complaining.”

He covered her hand with his. “Sometimes, we all need to have someone we can talk about our trials with. I’m glad I can be that someone for you.”

She smiled. “You’re a good man, Wade Kelso. Do you know that?”

“I try.”

## Chapter Six

Tackling the laundry the next morning was one of the most disgusting things Ada had ever had to do. Wade hadn't been kidding about how long it had been since he'd laundered his things, and she wished she could wash everything all at once, but she was fully aware her new husband couldn't work in the buff, though the idea of it amused her a bit.

As soon as the laundry was hanging on the line, she went inside and scrubbed the table. She was making bread, and her grandmother had always told her that no matter how clean she thought the table was, she needed to wash it again before baking bread.

Already she was feeling sore in every muscle of her body, and she wanted to take a day off to just lounge around and do some needlework, but that's not what a rancher's wife did. She had work to do every day of her life, and she would do it to the best of her ability.

She baked the bread, setting it in a bowl to rise, and then scrubbed her table again. Then she sat down and looked around her. She needed to find places for all the belongings she'd brought with her from Beckham, so that would be her next project. But first, she had to make lunch for a hungry man.

She took the last of the shepherd's pie from the ice box, and she put it into the oven to warm it up. She was planning a pot roast for supper that night, so she would need to start that shortly after lunch was finished.

When Wade came home for lunch, he washed his hands and then lifted the towel from the bowl of bread dough. "Are you making fresh bread?" he asked. "I haven't had fresh bread since I moved to my own place!"

"I am. I hope it comes out right. I've baked bread a dozen times with my grandmother over my shoulder, but I've never done it alone."

"I'm sure it will be delicious," he said.

"You have more confidence in me than I do!" She grinned at him. "Are you still working on fences?"

"Today, I'm letting the calves do as they want, and I'm taking the entire herd across the river. This is a job that would be better if

I had some ranch hands to help me, but I'm not willing to pay for them. Not yet anyway." He was already stretching his income by having her there, but he didn't tell her that.

Ada smiled. "Maybe next time, you'll ask your wife for help. You'll be surprised at what a good horsewoman I am."

"Nothing about you will surprise me," he said, taking a seat at the table.

She pulled the shepherd's pie from the oven and put two servings on one plate and one serving on another. Wade's huge appetite had not escaped her notice.

Giving his plate to him, she sat down on the side of the table beside him. He said a quick prayer, and they both began eating, with her telling him how much lye she'd gone through that morning. "I'm going to have to put more on my list the next time I go to the store. I have enough for a couple normal weeks of washing, but not much more than that."

He gave her a sheepish grin. "Mrs. Royal offered to do it for me, but I couldn't be a burden to her, so I said I'd take care of it myself. Now, if I just had..."

She laughed. "Most of it is done now. I just need to tackle what you're wearing, and then it will feel as if you have clean clothes all the time. You must have six pairs of pants!"

"I kept buying more when I didn't have time to wash them. Stupid plan, and I regret it now, but I didn't know what else to do."

"It's all handled now. At least until next week. I think I'm going to make Fridays my wash days."

He finished his meal and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Great job doing the wash. I'm looking forward to that bread!"

"Don't get your hopes up too high," she said as he disappeared out the door.

She did dishes and scrubbed the table once again before punching down the bread and dividing it into loaves. She was making three loaves, one per day through Sunday. She only hoped it would last that long around Wade.

Once she had the loaves in the oven and had prepped the pot roast for that evening, she sat down at the table and cut out her first dress. She'd brought a simple pattern from the newspaper with her—one her grandmother had given her ages ago—and used it to cut each piece carefully. Sewing was another thing she'd only done with her grandmother watching. Her mother had never allowed her

to do it at home, because she said that's what modistes were for.

The entire afternoon was spent sewing, with her getting up a few times to remove bread from the oven and putting the pot roast in. Sewing was difficult, long, and tedious work in Ada's eyes, but she knew she needed to do it. Hiring a modiste just wasn't an option anymore.

Shortly before six when she knew Wade would be home, Ada put the sewing on top of her trunk, only then realizing she should have emptied it before she started sewing. That would have to go on her list for the next day again, but all was well. Wade didn't care if she put her things away, she was certain.

She made a simple gravy her grandmother had taught her, and she had everything on the table waiting when Wade walked in. She'd even sliced the bread and tried a small piece. It wasn't as good as her grandmother's, but it was certainly better than her mother's cook's. She couldn't complain.

Wade's face lit up when he walked in the door and saw everything on the table, waiting for him. He was obviously tired from a difficult day at work, but he was pleased with the food. "How did the bread turn out?"

She shrugged. "Could be better. Could be worse."

"I can't wait to try it!" He looked at the ball of butter on the table. "Did you have time to churn butter, or did you buy some yesterday?"

"I bought some yesterday. I did notice the churn though, and I'm sure I'll try my hand at churning butter next week. I don't want to have to keep paying good money for it when I can easily make it myself."

"Churning butter is hard work," he warned. "Your arms will be very sore before you're done."

"I'm sure they will," Ada said. "That's all right though. My whole body aches right now." She laughed, shaking her head. "I thought I was ready for this kind of work, but apparently, you're never quite ready."

"No, you do have to get used to it. It sounds like you only really worked on weekends before coming here, and only when your mother didn't have a dance for you to go to."

"That's true. I only got to her one weekend a month or so." She sat down and served her plate. "I've never made a pot roast on my own before either. I hope it's good."

"I'm sure it's delicious." He had no doubt she could make a wonderful meal. The girl seemed to be able to do anything she put her mind to. He served his own plate and put two pieces of bread on it, both of them slathered with butter. "I don't even want to wait until after our prayer to try this bread, so we're praying fast."

True to his word, his prayer was so fast that Ada couldn't help but giggle. "You wanna try the bread that badly?"

"It's been so long!" he said, taking a big bite of the bread. "This is heaven. I don't care if you think it's not perfect." He groaned a little, taking another big bite. "Now you just need to buy honey or learn to make jam. I'd be happy with either."

She frowned. "I've never made jam. How am I going to learn?"

He took a big swallow of his bread before cutting up his meat. "Mrs. Royal will teach you. Have you gone over there and introduced yourself yet?"

"No, I haven't. I'll try to do that tomorrow." Her father didn't work Saturdays, but she was certain Wade would. His job didn't allow him two days off in the middle of the summer. Or any other time for that matter.

"You should. You'll love Cassandra, but her mother-in-law, Miriam Royal, is the best cook around. You go work with her when she's ready to make jam, and I'm sure you'll be great in no time."

"When is it time to cook jam?" she asked.

Wade thought for a moment. "Right about now. The huckleberries are blooming, and there are raspberries and other berries ripe. Go over there tomorrow and tell them you want to learn to make jam. I'm sure they'll send you to their bushes, and let you pick your own berries, and then teach you to make jam. Just tell them you're my wife, and you came from Beckham, just like Cassandra did."

She nodded. "It feels strange to talk to strangers and expect them to help me."

He smiled. "A year ago, I couldn't read. Cassandra taught me. Trust me, these are amazing people. And once you learn, you can teach our daughters."

"I like the idea of having daughters," she said with a big smile. "I can teach them how to keep house and cook."

"But if they want to be ladies, what will you do?" he asked, wiping his mouth.



She sighed. "I'll probably send them to my mother."

"Good. Even if it's not the life you wanted, they should be able to live the life they want if it's possible."

"Of course. I'm sure my mother would love that." She hadn't thought about the children she would have when she'd hopped on a train. Perhaps she'd made an error in judgment because her children wouldn't be raised with all the wealth and privilege she'd had. Wouldn't that be within their rights?

"Don't worry about it. We don't even know if you'll have any girls." She smiled, but the smile looked distant to him. "I'm sorry if I made you think about something you're not ready to think about."

"It's perfectly all right. I'm sure whatever children we have will be happy with their lives." She stood up and did the dishes. "I hope you won't mind having this for lunch again tomorrow. It will be much easier for me if I can cook two meals a day and heat up what's left from the night before for our noon meals."

"I think that's a wonderful idea." He took a sip of the milk she had on the table for him. "What did you do this afternoon?" he asked.

"I made supper and baked the bread. And I started working on my first dress."

"Are you enjoying sewing?"

She laughed. "It was a great deal more fun with my grandmother sitting beside me, reminding me what to do at each step."

"I can understand that. I'm glad you had her."

As soon as the dishes were done, she gathered her sewing and sat beside him, working on her stitching. He watched her for a moment, and then leaned back in his chair. "That color will be beautiful on you."

She chuckled, looking at him through her eyelashes. "Flattery? We're already married, Wade."

He grinned. "Doesn't mean I don't want you to think of me as the best husband you could possibly have."

"I already do," she said softly, stabbing her needle into the dress. "I really need a sewing machine. They do the work in a fraction of the time. Grandmother showed them to me."

He frowned. "They sound expensive."

"They are, but I still have some money. I'm sure it's enough for a sewing machine if you wouldn't mind if I bought it."

Wade sighed. "Are you going to be someone who needs to always be spending money?"

"Not at all. My mother had to drag me to the stores to get me to shop with her. It's just something that would make my life a great deal easier, and I have the money to do it. I also have jewelry I can sell if we need more money."

He shook his head. "No selling your jewelry."

"Why not?" she asked. "Everything I have is ours now. Why not use it to make our lives better?"

"Are our lives not good enough for you?"

Ada frowned. "You're taking everything I say wrong. Our lives are wonderful. But mine would be easier if I had a sewing machine. We'll have children, and I'll want to be able to make clothes for them. You'll need new shirts. I'll need new dresses. If I buy a sewing machine now, it will be used for all those things, and we'll get the most use out of it." She shook her head. "If it bothers you so much, I won't do it though."

"Will it really help you as much as you say?" he asked.

"It will! My grandmother would probably be faster than any machine, but I am *not*. I don't have the kind of experience she has."

Against his better judgment, Wade nodded. "Buy one tomorrow then, if that's what you want to do." He couldn't help but wonder how often she'd feel the need to spend her own money for things. He hoped it wouldn't be often.

## Chapter Seven

Saturday morning, after doing her chores for the day, Ada went to the Royals' ranch to meet and discuss jam making with Cassandra and Mrs. Royal.

Cassandra opened the door, her new baby against her shoulder. "Hello."

Ada smiled, surprised at how very nervous she was. "I'm Ada Kelso. I married Wade a few days back."

Cassandra smiled, but it was a tired smile. "Come in. The baby is colicky, so if I don't seem excited to have a guest, that's why. I'm very happy you're here." She waved to a plump woman in her fifties. "This is my mother-in-law, Miriam Royal. It'll be easier if you call me Cassandra, and call Miriam Mrs. Royal, if that's all right with you."

"I'd like that a lot." Cassandra sat down in one of the dining chairs, and Ada followed suit. "I'm sorry if I came at a bad time."

Cassandra shook her head. "Not at all. I'm just sleepy, but I'd be sleepy even if you weren't here."

"Wade told me to come over and introduce myself. He said Mrs. Royal would teach me to make jam if I asked nicely."

Mrs. Royal laughed. "I will. You don't even have to ask nicely. But if you'd pick the berries for the jam, that would be well worth my time to teach you."

"What will I need?" Ada asked, already excited. Wade had been right. These people were kind and eager to teach her things she needed to know.

"To pick the berries, you need a basket. You'll also need canning jars, but I have more than enough for both of our households, if you don't mind using mine."

"Not at all!" Ada said with a smile. "I plan to go to the store today, though, so maybe I should buy some?"

"Don't. Really there's no need." Mrs. Royal sat down at the table as well. "What do you need from the store?"

"A sewing machine," Ada said. "I'm not as good of a seamstress as I thought I was before coming here."

Cassandra laughed. "I'm a gardener. Mrs. Royal does all the real work around here."

"I think gardening is real work. I just feel like it's too late in

the season for me to put one in.”

“It probably is, but our garden is huge. I spent a great deal of my pregnancy working on planting and weeding. I’ll need help harvesting, but if you come and help me, you can have some of the food. Will that work? I just can’t do it all with little Carter. He’s a needy baby.”

“I can do all the harvesting for a share of the food. They were your seeds and you planted and weeded.” Ada eyed the baby with longing. Soon, she’d have a child of her own, but it never felt like it would be soon enough. “He’s beautiful.”

Cassandra smiled. “I think so. I just wish he’d sleep a little more and feel the need to nurse a little less.”

Ada wanted to ask a hundred questions about nursing, but she didn’t feel like she knew the other woman well enough yet. Besides, it would be at least nine months before she had to think about nursing a baby. “Do you need anything from the store in Cauldron Valley while I’m there today?” she asked.

Mrs. Royal sat down and wrote out a short list. “Mainly we’ll need sugar. If we’re going to be making jam, then sugar is a necessity. I do have a few other things I was going to head to the store for next week, and I’d be grateful if you were able to get those for me. Just put them on our account.”

Ada accepted the list. “I’ll head home to make lunch for Wade, then go to the store. Could I pick berries on Monday?”

“That would be wonderful,” Mrs. Royal said with a smile. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you and having berries to make jam from without having to pick them.”

“I’m excited to learn. I helped my grandmother make them just once, but I don’t remember anything except picking the berries.”

“Well, it sounds like you helped when you were a child then.”

“You’re right.”

Cassandra was looking at Ada funny, and then her eyes widened. “Are you Ada Applebottom?” she asked.

“Well, I was, but not any longer.” Ada felt fear run through her. She was recognized by someone who knew her maiden name.

“I remember I used to watch you and your mother out the window of the house where I was a nanny.”

“You did? I’m certain we were not very interesting.”

“I wasn’t allowed to leave the house except to go to church

and on my Sunday afternoons off. I wanted nothing more than to be able to walk freely.”

Ada frowned. “You must have worked for the Randalls. They were always a little crazy when it came to their sons.”

“Yes!” Cassandra shook her head. “I’ve been complaining about that family since I arrived in Montana, and I’m certain everyone thinks I’m crazy.”

“I don’t! Anyone who met the Randalls wouldn’t. They were the crazy ones.” Ada shook her head. “By the way, Mrs. Potter will be at church on Sunday. We want to find a time for us to get together. She seems to be homesick for Massachusetts, and we’re just the people to help her with that.”

Cassandra’s eyes brightened. “I’d like that a lot. Everyone could come here.”

“That would be wonderful. My house is a little small for company, seeing as it’s all one big room.”

“I’ve been there. I helped Wade move in.”

“Wade says you also taught him to read. I thank you for that.”

Cassandra smiled. “It was my pleasure. Wade has been a good friend to me since I arrived here.”

“I’m glad you found a good friend so quickly,” Ada said. “I’m hoping you and I will be fast friends as well.”

“And Mrs. Potter,” Cassandra added. “I’ve only met her once or twice, but I would love to get to know her better. She worked at the post office in Beckham until her father died.”

“Oh! I know who she is then!” Ada smiled. “I talked to her a few times when my mother would allow me to walk far enough away from her to fetch the mail.”

“Your mother was always at your side, wasn’t she?”

“She was. Every minute of every day. She wanted me to be a lady, just like her. I’m more of a farm girl sort.” Ada realized she’d just told someone from Beckham where she was. “Um...my mother doesn’t know where I am. I kind of disappeared in a train station, so if you could refrain from telling anyone in Beckham I’m here, that would be great.”

Mrs. Royal covered Ada’s hand with her own. “Your secret is safe here. There are many kinds of secrets, but I think most are necessary.” Ada felt that Mrs. Royal understood needing to run away perfectly. She had to wonder what the other woman had been through.

Late that afternoon, Ada returned to the Royals' house with the supplies Mrs. Royal had requested. When she was asked to supper, Ada shook her head. "I have to get home and cook for Wade."

"We're asking both of you to supper, dear," Mrs. Royal said. "Wade has eaten at our table many times over the years."

Ada nodded, smiling. "Then I'm sure we'd both love to come for supper. Thank you so much for the offer. I'll drive home and we'll be back at supper time. And I will be doing your dishes for you!" She didn't wait for a response as she hurried out of the house and headed for home.

It felt odd to call anywhere home but the huge house on Rock Creek Road, but she was happy there was a place that was hers and Wade's.

When she arrived at home, she unloaded the wagon, but didn't bother to unhitch the team. What was the point if they were going to be leaving as soon as Wade got home anyway?

Ada put everything away, excited to have her first supper invitation as a married woman. Certainly, she'd been invited many places for meals back in Massachusetts, but this was different. She wasn't being invited because of her parents, but because someone had liked her. It felt like she'd accomplished something.

She was working on setting up the sewing machine when Wade came in from work. He stopped and frowned at her. "Did you forget about supper?" he asked.

Ada shook her head. "Of course not." Why did the man persist in thinking she would not do her job as his wife? "The Royals invited us to supper tonight, and I accepted. I picked up supplies for them in Cauldron Valley as well, and since I was the one to spend the day driving, it made sense to accept."

"I see. And that's why the horses are still hitched to the wagon?" he asked.

"It didn't seem prudent to unhitch them and then have to hitch them up again less than an hour later. I'm doing my best to do what makes sense." She got to her feet from her spot on the floor. "I think I have the sewing machine almost ready to use."

"That's wonderful," he said. "Did Mrs. Royal agree to teach you to make jam?"

"She did. I need to pick the berries, but she'll teach me, we'll use her jars, and I'll get to bring some home."

"Sounds like a good arrangement." Wade walked toward the sink. "Let me just wash my hands, and then I'll be ready to go."

She smiled at him. "You may want to wash your face as well. You have a big streak of dirt across it."

He groaned. "I hate it when that happens, but it's part of working outside with your hands."

Within minutes, the two of them were headed to Royal River Ranch for supper. Cameron was waiting outside, and he reached out and shook hands with Wade. "We miss you around here!"

Wade smiled. "Some days I miss working here. It's hard to feel sure of where the next meal is going to come from now that I'm working for myself."

Cameron clapped Wade on the back. "I understand that completely. Come on. Ma has supper on the table, and I'm awfully hungry."

Wade grinned, watching as Ada moved along beside him. "This is my wife, Ada."

Cameron nodded. "Nice to meet you. I heard you made an impression on my wife and mother earlier."

Ada smiled. "I'm not quite sure how, but I won't complain."

Cassandra was helping put the food on the table, and Ada realized it was the first time she'd seen her without the baby. "Is the baby sleeping?" Ada asked.

Cassandra nodded. "So, no one is speaking above a whisper at this meal," she said, looking at her husband as if she was certain he'd be the one to break her rule and wake the baby.

"I told you I'd be good," Cameron said, raising both hands in mock surrender.

The evening turned out to be the best evening out Ada had ever had. There were no dancing or fancy meals, but the company was wonderful, and the food was good. She would be asking Mrs. Royal for some cooking lessons soon. The woman was a better cook than her grandmother, and Ada had never believed such a thing was possible.

After the meal, Ada helped clean up, wiping the dishes while Mrs. Royal washed them. "Are you sure you won't let me finish the dishes alone?" Ada asked. "You cooked!"

"And you drove to Cauldron Valley to get what I needed for supper. You're the heroine of the day, Ada."

They sat and visited until it was almost nine, and then Wade

stood. "I hate to be the first to go, but there are chores that need to be done tonight, and again before church in the morning. We'll have to do this again soon."

Ada nodded. "Perhaps you could come to our house next time. Or I could cook something and bring it here if you'd rather."

"We'll see," Mrs. Royal said, smiling at her. "I'm very happy that we have such a capable young woman near us now. Cassandra will love having a friend close by."

Cassandra nodded, and Ada smiled. "I'll love it too." And she heard the baby crying at just that moment. "I think your presence is being requested."

"Of course, it is. Come back soon!"

As they drove home, Ada couldn't stop talking about how much she liked Cassandra. "She lived three houses down from me in Massachusetts, but she was a nanny, and we never really got to talk. She told me today that she used to watch Mother and I walking down the street together. Mother insisted on healthful walks."

"Of course, she did." Wade stared straight ahead as he drove. It was dark, and it was much harder to see than usual. "Are you certain she won't contact your parents and tell them where you are?"

"I told her that I left without my mother's knowledge and asked that she not say anything to anyone in Beckham about me being here."

"Good," he said. "I'm still a bit worried about what will happen when your mother realizes you are here."

"That's why she can't know until we're expecting."

"What if it takes you five years to be with child? Or more?"

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I think we're trying to make a baby often enough that it shouldn't take long at all."

He chuckled. "I'm just glad you're enjoying it more now."

"Oh, I truly am. In fact, when we get home, I think we should try some more of that baby making."

Wade smiled. "I'll drive a little faster then!"

When they reached home, he unhitched the wagon, while she went inside to change for bed. Already, after just a few days in Montana, Ada felt like she was truly a wife. She spent time with a man she was growing to love, and he seemed to feel the same for her. She couldn't regret one minute of her decision to sneak away from her parents. Not when her life was just what she needed it to



be!

When Wade came back into the house, she went readily into his arms, so thankful for everything about this man. When she thought about the type of man she could have ended up married to, and she looked at Wade, she knew God had been looking out for her when she'd made the decision she did.

Perhaps he even approved, though that seemed a little far-fetched. Soon, though, she'd be able to tell her parents, and she wouldn't have to worry about it any longer. But first...first she had to have her way with her husband.

Afterward, she lay with her head pillowed on his shoulder and sighed contentedly. "You make being married and so far from home feel like a celebration. Thank you for being such a good husband to me."

Wade could only think about the times he'd been certain she'd let him down, and he frowned. He was going to have to work harder to have confidence in his wife. Yes, she was young and came from a different background than he did, but that didn't mean she was going to fail at being a wife. To the contrary, he couldn't imagine anyone working harder with a more cheerful attitude. Now he would need to work on being cheerful as well.

## Chapter Eight

Ada couldn't stop being nervous on the way to church the following morning. Everyone would surely know she'd run from her parents, and they would think her too young to be Wade's wife. She felt like every single shortcoming she had was written across her face.

Thankfully, she had a beautiful dress to wear for the services, and she was happy to know she was going to get to meet Mrs. Potter. There were three of them in the area from Beckham now, and all of them felt as if invisible threads were pulling them together. Well, that's how Ada felt, and she imagined the others feeling the same.

"What if everyone hates me?" she asked.

Wade shrugged. "It won't matter to me, and you're my wife not theirs."

"I worry no one will want to be my friend."

He laughed. "The Potters are driving over from Cauldron Valley. You already have Cassandra and Mrs. Royal as friends. Are you one of those people who needs to be friends with everyone she meets?"

Ada shook her head emphatically. "Not at all. I've never had a true close friend. There were acquaintances I was forced to spend time with because their mothers were friends with my mother...but I never fit in to the lifestyle I was forced to lead. I care so much more about how people feel about me here than I ever did about how they felt about me back in Beckham."

"Well, no one here will judge you, I don't think. I mean, there's always someone who isn't quite as kind as they could be, but you'll have two friends, just based on where you come from. I don't think it will be a worry at all."

"Do you have a lot of friends here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A few. I would say Cameron Royal is my closest friend. We worked together for so long, we grew close whether either of us wanted it. He's a good man."

"Then I guess it's good that I like Cassandra so much. We'll be able to spend time together, and hopefully our children will become friends, and they'll end up married, and we'll share grandbabies. I hope that happens anyway."

"Have you ever tried your hand at writing books?" he asked.

"No, why do you ask?"

"You have an amazing imagination!"

Since they were pulling into the churchyard, Ada managed to refrain from sticking her tongue out at her husband, but their proximity to the church and to other people was the only reason.

She waited for Wade to come around and hand her down, though it was difficult for her to do. She wanted to just jump down and run away, but it wouldn't be ladylike, and though people here didn't put as much stock in being ladylike as her mother had, Sundays were the days to display your best manners.

As soon as she was standing on the ground beside Wade, she smoothed the skirt of her dress down and took his arm. "I'm so nervous," she whispered.

"You're going to do just fine." Walking toward the church, he nodded at several of the people there. One man stopped him.

"Who is the beautiful woman on your arm?" The man looked at her. "Tell me you're not already married to him. You must give the rest of us a chance. I promise, you will like any other man in this church better than Wade."

Wade sighed. "Go away, Buster. I need to escort my wife into the church."

Buster groaned loudly. "How did you find her and marry her before any of the rest of us even got a chance to meet her?"

"Just lucky, I guess. I heard Widow Watkins is looking to marry again..."

"I wouldn't marry her for anything. She's...strange."

"Have a good day, Buster." Wade walked away from the other man and into the church, whispering, "Buster is the town drunk. Trust me. You didn't want to marry him anyway."

Mr. Potter and his wife made a beeline for them. She had a baby on one hip, and a toddler by the hand. "You must be Ada! I'm so excited to meet you."

Ada smiled. "I remember you from Beckham. You worked at the post office."

Mrs. Potter's eyes widened. "I remember you too then. I was certain it couldn't be the Ada Applebottom I remember. How on earth did you get away from your mother?"

Wade jerked at the woman's words. Perhaps he hadn't listened to Ada very well. If everyone in town knew she needed to

get away from her mother, then she probably really did.

"I may have run away in a train station." Ada wasn't proud of what she'd done, but she wasn't going to hide it either. "Just don't use my former last name, and don't tell anyone in Beckham. Except Elizabeth Tandy, of course."

"Oh, Ada. I'm so sorry it had to come to that. Was she still making you go to all of those parties and try to find a husband who *fit your station*?"

Ada shuddered. "She said that to me every single day."

"I know. I remember her scolding you on the street when you smiled at a man who wasn't suitable for you." Mrs. Potter shook her head. "It was an awful situation for you. I'm Bridget by the way. I don't know if we were every truly introduced."

"I'm Ada. It's so good to meet you this way. Mrs. Royal and Cassandra have said that all of us from Beckham should get together. I would adore that."

"You could come to me, but I think it would be better if I came here. Then only one of us must travel, and Cassandra's baby is so little." Bridget looked around the church. "I don't even see her here."

"The baby has colic," Ada said. "She probably had to stay home just to sleep."

"Oh, dear. We'll definitely travel to her then. When is good for you?"

Ada shrugged. "I'm happy with any time. I don't really know anyone other than the two of you, so anything works. I'm glad we're not so far apart that it's not possible."

"Not at all!" Bridget smiled. "I wish she was here to weigh in."

"Who do you want to be here?" came a voice from behind Ada.

Ada spun to see Cassandra standing there. "You, of course! Where's the baby?"

Cassandra smiled. "I fed him right up until it was time to leave, so Miriam said she would sit with him this morning. I have to go straight home after church because that baby doesn't like not being attached to my breast, but at least I get a little time to be me and not be his mama."

Bridget nodded emphatically. "I understand those feelings quite well. I wish I had a wonderful, well-meaning mother-in-law

around to watch my girls.”

“I know how fortunate I am.” Cassandra turned as Cameron came up behind her. “I feel like we’re newlyweds courting without the baby. I may have to sit with my husband and giggle a little.”

Cameron grinned. “Carter’s a special little person, though.”

“He is. I’m just tired and a little silly feeling.”

The pastor cleared his throat then and they all hurried to find seats. “Did you ladies work out a time for us to all get together then?” Wade asked Ada as soon as they were seated.

She shook her head. “No, I suppose we’ll have to talk about that after the service.”

“Sounds good.” Wade didn’t really care much when they all met up. He liked the idea of spending some time with the other men, but it didn’t matter too much to him when they did it.

Ada smiled at a woman there with her son, who sat beside her. “I’m Ada Kelso,” she whispered.

“Charlotte Watkins,” the woman whispered back. “Welcome.”

“Thank you!” Ada turned then because the preacher was starting to talk, but she wanted to get to know Mrs. Watkins better.

The sermon that week was about honoring your parents, and Ada wanted to sink straight through the pew onto the church floor. She hadn’t meant to dishonor her parents, but the truth was, she had.

After the service, Cassandra said, “Why don’t we all just go to my house now? I know that Miriam is probably cooking up a huge meal that the three of us won’t be able to eat, and then we can talk about ways to get together.”

“I’d love that,” Ada agreed. She’d planned to spend most of the day sewing, but she couldn’t complain even a little bit about a reprieve.

“I would too,” Bridget said. “Is that all right with you, Felix?”

He nodded. “We need to be home in time for me to do the milking, but other than that, I’m happy to be wherever you’d like.”

The six adults plus the two little girls took their three wagons and headed to the Royals’ home. When they arrived, the house smelled absolutely divine. Cassandra hurried inside with Ada at her side. “I invited six people for our Sunday dinner.”

“I knew you would,” Mrs. Royal said, smiling at Cassandra. “I fixed dinner expecting eight or so.”

Cassandra grinned at her mother-in-law. “Have I told you yet

today how much I love you?”

“Have I told you how thrilled I am that you gave me a grandson?”

The women worked together and within minutes, they had the meal on the table. As they ate, they joked and laughed, and had a wonderful time.

Wade couldn't help noticing that Ada was quiet. Much quieter than usual. He knew she'd gotten along well with the other men and women, so he had no idea what was wrong with her. “Are you okay?” he whispered when he was sure no one else was paying attention.

She nodded. “I'm fine.” But of course, she wasn't. She couldn't stop thinking about the pastor's words. She wasn't honoring her parents, and it was one of God's commandments. It was time for her to tell her parents where she was, whether she was pregnant or not. It wouldn't be easy, but necessary.

The children brought a smile to Ada's face after they'd finished eating. All of them sat and talked, and the children played on the floor. It was lovely to watch them.

While the rest of them talked and enjoyed the spectacle of the children, Mrs. Royal headed back to the kitchen. “I'm going to make us a cake for afternoon tea.”

“We don't need afternoon tea,” Cassandra argued. “We've just eaten a wonderful meal. Why do you think we need more?”

“A cake sounds good, Ma!” Cameron called to his mother.

“Sounds good to me too!” Wade said.

Ada sighed. “I think I need to learn to make more sweets from you. I am falling short when it comes to satisfying my husband's sweet tooth.”

For a moment, Wade was certain that Ada had said she fell short in satisfying her husband, and he was shocked. Not only because she was lying to everyone but because she would think that. After a bit, he realized what she'd really said, and had to hide his grin.

“Maybe I should pick some berries today,” Ada suggested. “Then we'll be ready for jam making in the morning.”

Bridget looked excited. “You're making jam?”

Ada nodded. “Mrs. Royal is going to teach me, but I have to pick the berries.”

“I'll pick berries with you and be back in the morning for jam

lessons!" Bridget looked around and her face turned red. "If I'm invited, of course."

"You're always invited!" Mrs. Royal said with a smile. "We'll have a nice jam making class, and I'll teach you to make jelly rolls."

Wade grinned. "You need to agree to learning to make jelly rolls. Mrs. Royal makes the best jelly rolls this side of the Rockies. I've never tasted anything I enjoy more."

Ada laughed. "All right. I'm off to pick berries."

Bridget got to her feet as well. "I'll pick berries too." She turned to her husband. "Watch the girls for me."

Felix nodded. "I'll watch them."

"And you won't let them swallow anything they shouldn't?"

He shook his head. "Sarah ate *one* marble, and you've never let me live it down."

Bridget shook her head and took one of the baskets that Cassandra brought them. "I'd offer to go with you, but...I think I'm taking this opportunity to nap. With as much as Carter has slept today, I'm certain I won't be allowed to sleep tonight."

Ada was halfway out the door when she stopped short. "Where are the berries?"

Everyone laughed, and Cameron gave her good directions. As she walked with Bridget, Ada felt the need to talk about the sermon. "I think I have to tell my mother where I am."

Bridget nodded. "Why do you think that?"

"I probably shouldn't have paid attention to the sermon this morning..."

"Well, I listened to it as well, and as much as I want to say it makes sense for you to let your parents know where you are, I'm not sure if that's really the case. I've seen your mother with you. I think she'll drag you back to Beckham and make you annul the marriage."

"That's what I keep saying, but...I feel like I'm doing more harm than good by being here and not telling them."

"My mother died when I was a little girl, and it was just my father and me until he died a few years ago, and I left Beckham. I can't imagine doing what you've done, but my mother was a kind woman. I don't think she ever would have tried to control my life."

They'd walked about ten minutes before they came upon the berry bushes. They stopped and both women started picking all the berries they could see. "I know my situation is odd," Ada said,

popping a ripe blackberry into her mouth. "And I thought I was justified in what I did until I heard the sermon this morning. I need to let my mother know I'm safe."

"I can see why you think so. It's probably a good idea even. I just hate the idea of your mother coming here and dragging you back to Massachusetts. I don't have a lot of friends from back home."

"Have you made other friends here?"

"I have!" Bridget said. "I'm friends with the several young women with families. I just feel a real connection with you and Cassandra. We grew up in the same area, and all came here as mail-order brides. I feel as if we have more in common than anyone else could possibly understand."

"I'm sure that's true..." Ada sighed. "I'll have to keep thinking about it. And talk it over with Wade. He won't like the idea at all, though." Or perhaps he would. He hadn't liked it at all when she'd told him she'd left without her parents' knowledge or permission.

"No, he really won't. I think you need to not tell your parents anything, but I don't know if I could live with my conscience if I did the same. I wouldn't want to have to be the one to make that decision." Bridget ate a raspberry and grinned. "We're going to be making delicious jam tomorrow."

"I'm excited!" Ada couldn't quit thinking about her dilemma though. Perhaps within a few days the answer would become clear.



## Chapter Nine

The entire way home that evening, Ada was on the precipice of telling Wade how she was feeling about writing to her parents, but she simply couldn't force the words out. She knew she should ask for his input before doing something drastic, but she just couldn't do it. What if he told her to never contact them? She felt like she must, and the error she'd made was something she'd done before marrying him, so she felt as if it was her decision to make regarding what to do.

She would write to her parents first thing in the morning. She should probably telegraph them instead, but she couldn't bear the thought of them being there so soon. It would be better if it took a couple of weeks for the letter to arrive and them to learn her true location.

When Ada went to bed that night, it was with the determination that she would contact her parents. It was the right thing to do.

Monday morning Ada was up before Wade, and she sat down to write the letter that could change everything. As soon as she was done, she put it into the pocket of her apron, and then she started the morning cooking. Wade was stirring before she had the bacon fried, and he dressed and went out to milk the cows and gather the eggs.

Knowing things could change in the blink of an eye, Ada was determined to make the most of the time she had with Wade. She made his favorite breakfast and kissed him goodbye before he left for the day.

As soon as he was gone, she hitched up the wagon and drove to town. She would rather have ridden one of the horses into town, but she needed a way to be able to take the jars of jam home when they were done making it.

As Ada arrived in town, she made sure to go straight to the post office, not that there was much more to the town of Mountain Home than the church and the post office. At least those things were there, and school was held in the church.

She handed the letter to the woman at the post office, smiling as she did so. "I'm Ada Kelso. I married Wade Kelso last week."

"It's so nice to meet you! I'm Edna Landry."

"I have to go, but it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Ada got into the wagon and drove quickly toward the Royals' ranch. She didn't want to lose her nerve and try to get the letter back before it made its way to Beckham.

She pulled up to the Royals' house shortly before Bridget did, but she waited outside to help her friend get the children in. They were little enough that it had to be hard to deal with both of them.

Bridget took one look at Ada's face and said, "You did it, didn't you? You sent a letter to your parents."

Ada nodded, feeling as if she'd done something terrible, but knowing it was the right thing at the same time. She couldn't allow her parents to constantly fret about her. "I just dropped it off at the post office in Mountain Home."

"Oh, Ada. I'll pray that it wasn't a mistake."

Ada sighed. "Thank you. I think I'll need those prayers. But I had to do something to assuage my guilty conscience." She jumped down and reached for one of the children. "Let's go learn to make jam."

The letter wasn't mentioned again as the women spent the day making huge pots of jam. Halfway through the day, Mrs. Royal said, "I don't think we have enough berries. I'll watch the children."

Ada and Bridget took that as their cue to go out and pick more berries, which suited them well. "I'm excited to try the huckleberry jelly," Ada said.

Bridget nodded. "I think huckleberries are too tart, but I have a feeling, Mrs. Royal will have a way to make them the most delicious jelly we have ever tasted."

"I think Mrs. Royal knows everything there is to know about cooking," Ada agreed. "I want to learn all I can from her."

"I hope you're here long enough to learn as much as you'd like to learn," Bridget responded.

"So do I." They filled both baskets they'd been given with berries before heading back to the house. "I wonder how they'd taste if we mixed them all together."

Bridget smiled. "I think that would be just crazy enough to work well. We could call it wild berry jam."

"That sounds absolutely delicious to me."

When they arrived back at the house, Mrs. Royal had some jam cooled for them to try. "I set this aside before putting the rest in jars and putting them into the canning pot. I'll teach you how to

do that with this next batch.” She looked at the berries they’d brought back and grinned. “We’re all going to have a good amount of jam to last us through the winter. Not as much as last year, but enough, I would think.”

“We could always come back and do it again,” Bridget suggested.

Ada nodded. “I would love that.”

“We’re going to need to leave the jars here to cool and set overnight. I’m sure one of us can bring your share to you later in the week if that works for you, Bridget.”

“I’ll volunteer for that task!” Ada said. She loved that these women didn’t want her to be useless. She was certain she could not return to doing as little as she had before marrying Wade, even if her parents insisted.

“Sounds good. Let’s say you do it Thursday or Friday, and I’ll make us a nice lunch.”

“Thursday is better for me,” Ada said. “I’m doing laundry on Fridays.”

“That’s my least favorite chore,” Bridget said, shaking her head. “I hate every minute of it.”

“I don’t blame you,” Ada said. “It’s not my favorite, but I’ll do it whenever I need to.”

“I tend to put it off longer than I should,” Bridget admitted.

“Do you ladies want to come back on Wednesday, pick more berries, and put up more jam?” Mrs. Royal asked.

Cassandra hadn’t participated much. According to Mrs. Royal, she’d been up all night with the baby.

“I would love that,” Ada said. She was determined to live every moment she could before her parents arrived, and that meant with friends she’d made there as well as with Wade.

Bridget shook her head. “I really shouldn’t. It’s such a long drive, and I’m putting off housework to just be here.”

“That’s understandable,” Ada said. “I’ll pick extra berries for you!”

Mrs. Royal nodded. “And I’ll send them to you with Ada. I think that’s just fine.”

Bridget looked for a moment as if she was going to refuse, but then she smiled and nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Happy to do it,” Ada said, and she was. It felt good to be able to help others through her hard work.

Shortly before lunch time, Ada headed home to make lunch for Wade. They ate together, and he looked around for the jam. “No jam?” he asked.

She shook her head. “We have to let it set. I’m going back this afternoon to make more. Is it all right if we don’t have bread with supper? I could come home early, but then we wouldn’t get nearly as many jars of jam made.”

“That would be all right, I suppose,” he said softly. “See if you can talk Mrs. Royal into one of her pies, though. She makes the best pies I’ve ever eaten.”

“I will.” Ada had thought her pies were good when she’d made them with her grandmother, but she knew they wouldn’t compare to Mrs. Royal’s. Perhaps part of her afternoon could be spent learning to make pies.

When he headed back to work, Ada saddled a horse and went to the Royals’ happily riding astride. Since she realized, she wasn’t going to need to have the wagon to bring home the jam, she had no reason not to ride and be comfortable.

After the jam making and jelly roll baking were over for the day, Ada rode home and started supper, this time planning a simple beef stew. It was something her grandmother had always made for her, and she enjoyed it so.

Mrs. Royal had given her a loaf of bread as she left, saying she knew she hadn’t had time to make any. She also gave her a pie and one of the jelly rolls. Ada had thanked the older woman profusely, knowing that having the baked goods would make supper so much better for Wade.

When he walked in the door, he sniffed the air and sighed contentedly. “Is that beef stew?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes. It’s one of my favorite meals,” she said.

“Good. It’s one of mine too. And I love chicken pot pie if you ever feel like making that.”

Ada smiled. “I will make one soon then.” It was one of the receipts her grandmother had given her, and she was thrilled to make it for him. It was nice to be able to cook for her husband.

“Bread?” he asked, after washing his hands. “I thought there was no time?”

“Mrs. Royal sent it home with me along with a pie and one of the jelly rolls. That woman is a marvel in the kitchen. I’ve never seen anyone like her. I thought my grandmother was the best cook

in the whole world, until I tried Mrs. Royal's cooking."

"I'm not complaining even one little bit," he said.

"I'm going back on Wednesday, and I'll pick berries, and we'll make more jam and pie filling. Mrs. Royal promised to teach me to can my pie filling on Wednesday, and then I can just make a crust and add it. She said she has apple trees as well, and we'll make apple pie filling this fall when the apples are ripe." She felt a pang as she realized she might not be there in the fall. It would make her sad if she wasn't a part of their little community for long.

After supper, Ada worked on her dress while Wade milked the cows. She planned to make love with him as soon as he walked back inside. It was the only way she could let him know how much she loved him without words. She couldn't possibly let the words slip out before her parents arrived. It would be too hard to leave if the words had been spoken. No, she'd do what she could to make good memories, but she wasn't about to make leaving harder.

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Ada counted down every day she had left with Wade before her parents arrived. By her calculations it would take them between three and four weeks to arrive, and since they'd already had one week, it would be over five weeks into their marriage before a letter arrived from her parents or they arrived on her doorstep.

It was late on a Friday morning four weeks later when she was hanging her clothes on the line that a buggy arrived at the ranch. Ada shaded her eyes, not knowing who it was, but then she felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She carefully hung the work shirt she held and wiped her hands on her apron before walking to the carriage to greet them. "I see my letter arrived," she said. Ada had apologized profusely for worrying her parents in the letter. She didn't feel the need to apologize again.

"Why did you run away?" her mother asked, grabbing her in a bear hug.

Ada pushed away, feeling almost suffocated by her mother's love. She always had. "I needed to live the life I wanted to live. No matter how many times I told you I wouldn't be happy married to a gentleman, you simply told me I was being silly, and that I needed to trust you."

Her father sighed. "I told you that you were smothering her."

"I wasn't smothering her. I was helping her to become her best self." Mother reached out and took one of Ada's hands, turning

it over to look at the calluses there. "You've been working so much harder than anyone should."

Ada shook her head. "I worked as hard as I should. It's part of being a ranch wife." Not wanting to disappoint her parents, but knowing she had to finish hanging the laundry, she said, "Go ahead and go inside. I'm about to fix lunch for Wade and myself, but I need to finishing hanging the wash first."

Her mother's nose went straight into the air as she walked toward the tiny home her daughter was living in. "Richard!" she called to her husband when she realized he wasn't following.

"I'm going to help Ada hang the wash," he said, walking over to his daughter, and handing her garments for her to hang, like he'd done for his mother so many years before.

"Thank you," Ada said softly, smiling at her father.

"Are you happy here?" he asked.

Ada nodded. "Very happy. I'm in love with my husband, and I was right about the kind of life I need to lead. I'm happy doing the chores and working hard. I would have gone crazy if I'd been forced to sit and do embroidery all day. I won't say that I don't miss being able to sit around on occasion because the amount of work necessary is ridiculous, but this is the life I was meant to live."

"Then you and I will find a way to convince your mother that this is where you need to be." Her father smiled at her, a slight smile in case her mother was watching. Ada knew as well as her father did that her mother had him kowtowed.

"Thank you, Papa," she said, feeling relief spread through her. Now they just had to convince her mother.

## Chapter Ten

Wade returned home for lunch and went straight inside the house, expecting Ada to be waiting for him. Instead, he saw a complete stranger sitting at his table, looking around her as if an insect had just flown up her nose, and she was expecting more.

He stopped and stared at her for a moment, finally asking, "May I help you with something?"

The woman glared at him, got to her feet, and walked across the tiny house to him, stabbing him in the chest with the pointer finger of her right hand. "You are the man my daughter gave up everything for! What does she see in you? How did you coerce her away from us?"

Wade's eyes widened. "You must be Mrs. Applebottom."

"Don't act like there's even a question of who I am! Unless you have more wives hidden about this house! Are there more wives? You are an evil man, and I'm disgusted by you!"

"Please, sit down. I'm not sure where Ada is, but when she comes inside, we'll talk."

Mrs. Applebottom ignored his suggestion to sit. "She is out there washing clothes like some sort of maid. Her beautiful hands are rough and red from all the work she's been made to do living here with you! And now my husband is outside helping her hang clothes, as if he isn't an extremely important man."

"I see. Let me go and see if they're ready to come inside." Wade left the house as quickly as he could, not waiting for a response or even for acknowledgement from the woman. He spotted Ada standing with a man and smiling up at him. The clothes basket appeared to be completely empty. "Ada?" he called.

Ada turned, a shocked look on her face. "I wasn't expecting you home for a few more minutes. I figured it would be easier just to wait out here and not listen to Mother. Did you meet her?" She looked afraid of his answer.

He nodded. "Lovely woman. She wants to know how many other wives I have here after I've ruined your life."

Ada grinned. "This is my papa, Richard Applebottom."

Wade walked forward and offered his hand to the older man. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Applebottom."

"Papa, this is my husband, Wade." The smile she gave him

surprised him to his core. How could she possibly be so calm with her parents standing there? She'd dreaded the moment she had to tell them she'd married.

Her father looked back and forth between them, and then said, "I'm going to go inside and see if I can soothe your mother."

"There are leftover chicken and dumplings in the ice box. Would you put them on the stove for me?"

Mr. Applebottom nodded as he headed inside. "I'd be delighted to."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Wade turned to Ada. "What are they doing here? How did they find out where you were?"

"I sent them a letter."

"You what? When?"

"About a month ago. After the sermon on honoring your parents. I couldn't let them keep worrying about me, so I wrote to them, telling them where I was and that I was safe and happy."

He blinked a few times, trying to fully comprehend the situation. "And you didn't think to tell me this? Are you joking?"

"I thought that since I was the one who decided to disappear on my own, I should make this decision myself too. Doesn't that make sense?"

He closed his eyes, trying to keep his anger in check. The woman was daft. "It would make sense if you'd told me what you'd done. Why on earth did you keep it a secret?"

"I told Bridget," she said softly.

"Bridget isn't here to deal with your parents though, is she?" He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I really don't know what you were thinking."

"I'm sorry." She hadn't considered what she was doing would upset him so much, but it obviously had. His reasons made sense. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Apparently, you weren't thinking at all!" He shook his head as another, more dire thought occurred to him. "Did you tell them where you were so they could come and take you home? Do you not want to be here with me?"

"Oh, Wade, please don't think that. I love you, and of course I want to be here."

"You love me? Is this how you show it?" He wasn't certain if he should be thrilled to know she loved him or drag her off to the



river and push her in. She certainly wasn't making any sense to him. Perhaps the water would help her mind work again.

Ada wrapped her arms around his middle. "I should have told you. I see that now. I just didn't want you angry with me, and sometimes it's easier to pretend that everything is all right. But now you're angry with me anyway."

He sighed, pressing his face into her hair. "I'll get over it. But how are we going to convince your parents that they need to leave without you?"

She looked up at him with a huge smile. "Papa said he understands, and he'll help us."

"Well, that changes things, doesn't it?" Wrapping one arm around her, he guided her toward the house. "You've told me so much less about him than you have about your mother."

"That's because I didn't get to see Papa as much. He was always working. Mother was pretty much the only parent I knew well. If I'd had any inkling Papa would help me to escape, I'd have told him what I wanted to do. I'm not sure he'd have let me run off to marry a stranger, but now that it's done, he sees the wisdom in what I did."

"There was wisdom in what you did?" he asked, just before opening the door.

As soon as they were inside, Papa called, "The dumplings are starting to bubble. I've been stirring them, but I think they're almost ready."

"Oh, good." Ada ignored her mother as she hurried across the small room to the pot on the stove and checked the heat of the dumplings. "They're ready. Go ahead and sit down. I'll serve us."

Her mother gasped. "My only daughter is serving people! What will become of her?"

Everyone ignored Mrs. Applebottom as Ada served them each a bowl of the dumplings. "I can offer water or fresh milk to drink."

"Not even wine?" her mother asked.

"No, no wine." Ada took everyone water, and she sat down with them. Wade took her hand in his as he prayed over their meal. It was a simple prayer, but it meant everything to Ada because it meant they were inviting God into their discussion, and only He could keep her mother in check.

"As soon as we finish eating, I'm going to help you pack your things, and we're going to catch the first train back east," her

mother said after taking a bite of the dumplings. "These are good." She looked particularly surprised that the food her daughter had cooked was edible.

"Ada's a wonderful cook," Wade said, smiling at his wife. Even though he was annoyed with her for not telling him she'd written to her parents, he wasn't about to let it show in front of them.

"How?" Mrs. Applebottom asked, taking another bite of the food.

"Grandmother worked with me every weekend. I didn't just wear my hair down and ride astride. I did so many other things... things that most young women learn." Ada took her first bite of the chicken and dumplings. "This got better overnight!"

Wade nodded. "And it was fabulous last night."

"I'm still taking you home with me," her mother said. "Just because you can cook doesn't mean I'm going to let you throw your life away on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. Are we even still in the United States?"

Mr. Applebottom smiled at his wife. "Yes, dear. We're in Montana, which became a state a few years back."

"Well, it's still godforsaken country. I bet Indians are a constant bother!"

"Not at all, ma'am," Wade said. "I have seen very few Indians, and the ones I've met have been friendly and happy to trade with white men."

"They should be!" Mrs. Applebottom sighed. "Never mind that. You're coming home where you belong, Ada."

Ada sat up straight and looked into her mother's eyes. "No, I'm not. I'm a married woman now, and I'm happy here. I'm not going anywhere."

Her mother's jaw dropped. "Richard, offer him a job!"

Ada's father shrugged. "Do you have any desire to have a job in banking back east?"

Wade shook his head. "I'm living out my dream here. I always knew I wanted a ranch out west, and that's exactly what I have. Why would I go out east?"

Mr. Applebottom looked at his wife. "He doesn't want a job, Nancy. He's happy here." He looked at his daughter and winked. "I think we should just give them her dowry and go back where we came from. Of course, Ada will need to write regularly, and we

would like to be able to come back to see our daughter, if that's all right with you, Wade."

Wade finished chewing his bite of food and nodded. "I'd like that a great deal."

Mrs. Applebottom glared at her husband. "See? He only wants her dowry!"

"I meant I would like you to visit, not give me a dowry. Ada and I are doing just fine on our own," he said.

Ada smiled sweetly at her mother. "I don't need anything more than what I have right here."

Mr. Applebottom frowned. "You'll take the dowry," he said. "I'm insisting upon that. When you're ready to expand your ranch, you will want to have ready capital at hand, and I will provide that."

"We really don't need your money, sir."

"You may not need it, but it will come in handy someday. The children will come, and you'll realize this house is too small for more than two people."

Wade looked down. It was already too small, but he didn't want to admit it. "We'll make do."

"Then put the money into the bank for my grandchildren. I promise the money came from hard work, and it's not tainted in any way."

Ada didn't say anything, but she really hoped Wade would take the money. She had no idea how much was in her dowry, but she knew whatever amount would make their lives easier. When Wade glanced at her, she gave a slight nod.

"All right. We'll accept the money. Thank you." He didn't like that he was accepting money from the people who had forced his wife to run from them to be able to live the life she wanted to live.

Mrs. Applebottom frowned. "Don't let her stay, Richard."

"I can't make her leave with us. She's married, and she loves her husband. Why would we think we could make her happy in Massachusetts when she's been miserable there for years? Just like I had to not be a farmer to find my happiness, she needs to be with her rancher. You do want our daughter to be happy, don't you?"

"I do...but I don't want her to be so far away..."

"You can come visit any time you would like," Ada said softly. "And I'll write often. We won't keep the children from you."

Tears were streaming down her mother's cheeks as she finally

nodded. "I suppose I have no choice in the matter."

Mr. Applebottom shook his head. "Neither of us do. It's time we let our daughter be exactly who she wants to be."

They stayed most of the afternoon, chatting with Wade about his plans for the ranch. Just before leaving, Mr. Applebottom slipped an envelope into Wade's hands.

Ada hugged both of her parents, promising that she would write at least every month. She wasn't a good correspondent, so she didn't feel like she could promise to write more often than that. She knew her own weaknesses.

After her parents had driven away, Wade turned to Ada. "Please don't ever hide anything from me again. You are a good wife, and I love you, but I will not do well if this type of situation is presented to me often."

Ada flew into his arms. "You really love me?"

He chuckled. "I really love you. Now promise me no more secrets."

She kissed his chin and snuggled into his body contentedly. "No more secrets."

He kissed her softly and sighed. "I really should get back to work."

"You only have an hour before supper. There's no point in working that little is there?"

"Probably not." His gaze caught the envelope he'd dropped on the table when he caught her. "Do you know how much your father gave for your dowry?"

She shrugged. "No idea at all. I didn't even know there was a dowry, though if I'd thought about it, I would have. Look and see."

Reaching for the envelope, he opened it, and his jaw dropped. "I cannot imagine using this much money in a lifetime!"

"Then you can hire a couple of men and not work so hard!" she said. "You still will have to work hard, but it would be nice if you didn't have to work ten hours every day but Sunday. And we could have a bigger house with a water closet!" She loved the idea of living the best of both worlds. She could be a rancher's wife, but she could have a little more to work with. It would be wonderful.

He chuckled. "Look at you. Already spending all this money. I guess I need to get used to the fact that I married a society girl from the east."

"I guess you do," she said, grinning up at him.

“Well, I promise I still love you for who you are, not for the money that came by marriage.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

## Epilogue

The new house was built before the baby came, but just barely. Wade worked hard to finish it before her mother arrived to help with her grandchild.

Ada stood, looking out over their property, a smile on her face, and a hand on her belly, rubbing the foot that was in her ribs. "Thank you for finishing my house," Ada said to Wade.

"You are most welcome. I knew I couldn't bear for your mother to arrive tomorrow and to immediately start complaining about the tiny house we lived in."

"Well, she certainly can't do that now!" Ada smiled, snuggling her head under his chin. "I can't believe she's going to be here for the baby's birth."

"She really does love you," he said. "Even if you're not living the life she wants you to live."

"I know. And I love her too...I'm just glad I got out before she completely ruined my life."

He stroked a hand down her back. Everything was perfect now. Soon, they'd have a child and be a true family.